VENTURE FORTH

SPECIAL OCTOBER ISSUE

INSIDER!

Rantaro Amami:
THE ULTIMATE ADVENTURER

Exclusive Interview!

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How to Survive a Killing Game

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Places to see before you die, fashion tips & MORE!

A zine about Rantaro Amami

Venture Forth is an unofficial fanzine centered around the character Rantaro Amami from the Danganronpa V3 series. Thank you for downloading your copy of the zine, we hope you appreciate our efforts!

The Mods would like to thank all of our wonderful contributors and supporters. We could not have completed this zine without all of your help!

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Sincerely,
The Venture Forth Mods, Kei and Leon.

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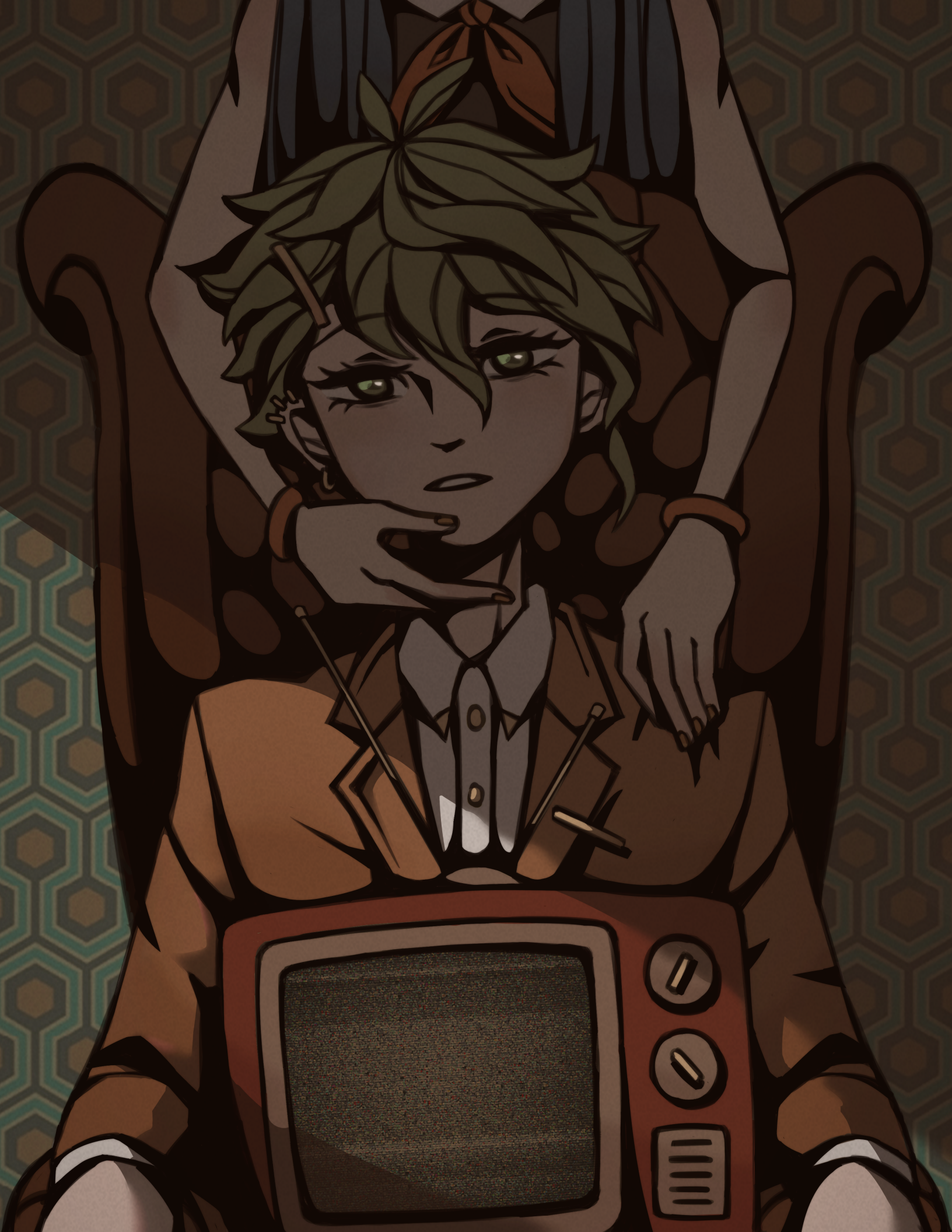


TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

glownary, art by caeboa • Table of Contents

Dear Amami-san,

Ultimate Adventurer is such a cool talent! When I sign up for Danganronpa, I want my talent to have taken me all over the world, too. I was thinking I could be the Ultimate Tour Guide. I wish I could go adventuring with you!

Another season fifty-three hopeful. As he moved the letter to the checked pile, Rantarou briefly hoped—for their sake—that they wouldn't get in.

Dear Amami-san,

You're my absolute favourite participant from all 52 seasons—don't tell the others ;)

It would mean so much to me if you sent a letter back with your autograph!

He narrowed his eyes at that one; he had received plenty of fan mail claiming he was the sender's favorite, but none were quite so… short and to the point as this. He couldn't help but wonder if the rest of the cast had received the same letter with the name swapped out, given how vague and impersonal it was. Autographs sell decently well, after all. The letter quickly joined the rest in the checked pile.

Dear Amami Rantarou,

I don't care how popular you are. You should have died in chapter three. Everyone knows Akiko-chan should have survived instead.

I hope it keeps you up at night knowing that it should have been you.

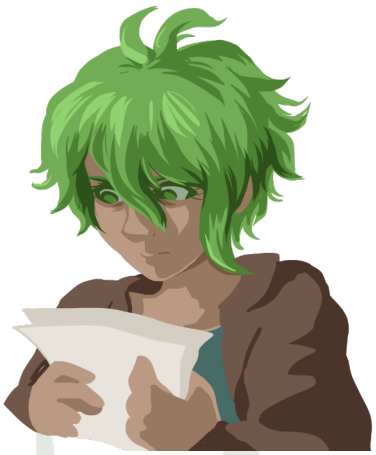
...Hate mail was rare for him. This one was particularly biting, and hit a sore spot.

But the sender was wrong, he knew that. He shouldn't have died in her place—*none* of them deserved to die. He wouldn't allow anyone to make him feel guilty for things he couldn't have possibly known. The trap was meant to kill him. Akiko got there first.

He just hoped that she could forgive him.

Dragging a hand through his hair, Rantarou glanced from the mountain of checked mail to the quickly dwindling pile of unopened letters. It wouldn't take him long to get through the remainder.

The possibility that he wouldn't find what he was looking for loomed over him in his mind. He elected to ignore the sinking feeling until he knew for sure.



Just as his fingertips brushed the next envelope, there was a knock at his door—a nurse, reminding him that it was time for dinner. He was half tempted to stay and finish, but he *was* hungry, and... maybe a little bit afraid to find out that the letter wasn't there.

Maybe he was a little bit afraid to find that it *was* there, too.

Putting it off for a bit couldn't hurt. The letters would be there when he got back.

Most of the others were already in the cafeteria, chatting and eating, by the time Rantarou arrived. He made eye contact with Akiko across the room, and his heart climbed into his throat, but she just gave him a small smile and a wave.

Tension that he hadn't realized he was carrying eased from his shoulders. He returned the wave, his own smile soft across his features, before making his way to the buffet line.

The food served at the facility was actually pretty decent. God knows the company could afford it, but Rantarou was almost surprised that they didn't choose to skimp on it. He scanned the room, weighing his options—a few people sat on their own, far from the others. He wouldn't bother them when they clearly wanted to be alone, but he could follow in their footsteps and sit at an empty table.

Then, there were multiple small groups of people eating together and talking. He didn't particularly feel like exchanging pleasantries, but he didn't want anyone to think he was avoiding them, either.

His eyes drifted back to Akiko. She wasn't alone at her table, but she wasn't engaging in conversation with the others, either.

Rantarou made his way over and she glanced up at him, eyes widening slightly. "Is it alright if I join you?"

She took a moment to respond, but nodded. "Of course."

She had never been the most talkative person during the game, and in the few times he had seen her since it ended, it seemed that she had only become quieter in its wake. They ate in comfortable silence.

Rantarou knew he hadn't been the most... present... in the last week and a half since the survivors had been awoken. Akiko might forgive him, but he felt a twinge of guilt at his self-isolation. He had no idea how well the others were faring.

Despite the casual school-lunchroom vibe, there was the unmistakable feeling that he was being watched. Rantarou paused with his sandwich halfway to his lips. He looked up. Three tables away, all by herself, was Tsumugi—the two of them locked eyes for just a split second before she hurried to look away.

They weren't friends. None of them were friends with Tsumugi, really; what with her constant cooing about how cool the killing game was. *"It's just like a video game, isn't it?"* she had said to him, once. She stared right through him with those oddly intense, vibrant blue eyes. *"And Amami-kun would be the protagonist."*

So maybe she wasn't far off. Didn't make her treatment of the game any less unsettling.

"Amami-san?"

He focused on the source of the sound with a slight jerk of his head, clearing his throat before responding. Akiko's eyebrows were drawn together, her lips slightly parted as though she wanted to ask something but wasn't sure how. He must've been gripping the sandwich too tightly—a tomato slice snuck out and plopped onto the table. Avoiding her gaze and offering an apologetic smile, he started, "Sorry, I..."

Over Akiko's shoulder he could see three empty tables. The third of which was where Tsumugi had been. Inexplicably, Rantarou's heart sank to his stomach.

"I lost my appetite."

The statement did nothing to assuage Akiko's apparent concern—far from it—but she allowed him to get up and leave without protest. He paused, tray in one hand, to wave goodbye. "I'll see you again soon."

Rantarou tossed the food in the trashcan near the exit and left the tray on top, walking as briskly as he could without attracting attention. As he turned down the hall with a racing heart and ice in his veins, he couldn't find an explanation for the sudden urgency he felt. He'd kept an eye out for Tsumugi all game, more suspicious of her than anyone else, but the game was over now and she hadn't killed anyone. She had survived.

Just like him.

Two weeks in the game. A week and a half out. Maybe it was too soon to expect the dread to leave him, but he was worried that it never would.

Rantarou approached the door to his own room with caution, like...

Like... what? What was he expecting, exactly? A pool of blood, a body, the discovery noise, Monokuma's hideous laughter?

She wouldn't even be there. It's stupid, it's all so *stupid*, there's no reason she would've gone to *his* room—there's nothing he has that she would want. But he opened the door like he expected to find her there, anyways.

Shirogane Tsumugi was just as surprised to see him as he was to see her, if not more. She held a single envelope in her right hand.

Tension thick in the air, she shifted to face him with an appeasing smile. She could tell he spotted the envelope; her fingers twitched, but she made no move to hide it.

"Amami-kun! Sorry, this is awkward... I was hoping to be finished before you got back."

Rantarou's head spun. Was she openly admitting to stealing from

him? Her placating expression and chilling eyes suggested otherwise. He stood firm, blocking the only exit. "What, exactly, were you hoping to be finished with?"

"Well, I was going through my own mail this morning when I noticed some of it was actually addressed to you. The company must have mixed a few letters up." Tsumugi pushed her glasses up with her left hand, keeping the letter safely tucked at her side with the right. Her grip was firm, but not tight enough to seem nervous. "I didn't want to bother you, really. I figured I could return them while you were gone, but when I got here, I realized you might have received some of my mail, too."

She stated it with such certainty that, had his mind not been blaring alarm bells for the last ten minutes, it almost could've been believable. "Is that so?"

"Yes."

"And the envelope you're holding is addressed to you, then?"

Her eyes flickered back to the piles of mail. There was a brief pause, a moment of deliberation; yet she still didn't seem troubled. "It is."

"Can you show me?"

She knew, she *had* to know that there was no point in trying to talk her way out of this anymore. Still, her eyelashes fluttered, and she responded with indignation. "Well that doesn't seem appropriate. I didn't look through any of yours."

"Shirogane-san."

Her lips drew into a small, flat line. With her smile finally gone, Rantarou found it easier to breathe. "I don't need to see the letter. Just the name on the envelope."

"You were never going to believe me, were you?"

He froze.

Tsumugi sighed, her stance becoming defensive, as though she thought he might try to take the letter by force. "It's addressed to you." Even caught red-handed, she clearly wasn't planning on giving it up.

"Bold, to admit that and still refuse to give it back," he said.

"Will you hurt me for it?"

Eyebrows shooting up, Rantarou shook his head with a slight frown. "Of course not," he started, before turning to shut the door behind him. "But neither of us is going anywhere until you give it back and explain what this is all about."

Tsumugi sighed again, her shoulders relaxing a bit. "Fine. I was hoping to have a bit more tact, and to have this conversation on my own terms, but I suppose it's unavoidable." Her eyes narrowed. "Do you know who this letter is from?"

A lump formed in his throat. He only had one guess, though he still didn't understand what Tsumugi was playing at. "One of my sisters."

"That's right. You've been waiting to hear from them, haven't you? Twelve half-sisters but this is the only letter in the pile from any of them. Did you think that they'd abandoned you?"

None of them had abandoned him—not by choice. He felt the urge to correct Tsumugi, to defend them, but he kept his mouth shut. The less she knew about him, the better; and she clearly already knew too much.

"There are more letters from the others," she said. Rantarou's eyes widened but she continued to speak; "I told the company to withhold them from you. This one slipped through the cracks. So troublesome that they all have different surnames..."

"What?" He couldn't have heard her right. "You... *told* the company—why? Why would they take orders from you?"

Tsumugi's smile returned, but it was different than the placating

one she had given him when he first discovered her in his room. He recognized it as the same look she had given him when comparing their situation to a video game; the same toothy smile she had upon waking up from the simulation, all bright eyes and pure excitement.

"Because I'm going to be the mastermind of season fifty-three."

A shock ran through his system, shaking him to his core. There was no time to recover before she pushed onwards.

"And you—" she attempted to place a hand on his shoulder, which he quickly recoiled from, "—you're going to be my Ultimate Survivor."

"I wo—"

"You have a choice, but it isn't much of one. Participate and the letters are yours. They all have return addresses listed, so you'll be sure to find your sisters. If you want to fight back, and scream about mail fraud, well... see how far that gets you with Team Danganronpa's lawyers."

"Why me?"

That gave her some pause. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Because the fans love you. Because... you survived. Because I have leverage over you, and because it can't just be me—one character returning is suspicious, but two is an interesting season gimmick."

The word "character" stuck out in Rantarou's mind like a sore thumb.

"You told the company at your audition that you were just trying to catch your sisters' attention by appearing on their favorite

show, in the hopes that they would want to reconnect. What's one more season to reach your goal?"

He couldn't, he couldn't go through it again. The Rantarou of six months ago didn't understand what it would be like. Not really.

Tsumugi flexed her fingers, the paper envelope bending in her grasp. "I'll give you some time to think about it. As soon as you sign the contract, the letters are yours."

She was *awful*, Rantarou thought; she was a participant just like the rest but she carried the attitude of a Team Danganronpa employee. She *was* an employee now, he supposed. Tsumugi witnessed as much death and suffering as he had and came out the other side looking for more.

"Get out of my room."

"With pleasure."

He stepped away from the door, sick of looking at her and her wretched, soulless eyes. To his dismay, she paused once more, with her hand against the doorframe. "A man present in body but lost at heart, searching for his lost family. That would make a great backstory this time around, wouldn't it?"

"I don't care."

She simply shook her head. "Next time," she said. "We'll discuss it next time."

And Tsumugi was gone, leaving nothing but turmoil in her wake. The letter was gone with her.

Rantarou crumpled to the floor with his back against the door. He wanted to cry, or scream, or—something, he wanted to do something but his body just trembled lightly without a sound. The executives he

had sold his life to the first time were cautious and charismatic and so very careful with their words. He was already cornered and Tsumugi knew it, and she didn't give him the luxury of softened words or the illusion of freedom. With a pained laugh, he wondered if he should at least be thankful that she was honest about ruining his life.

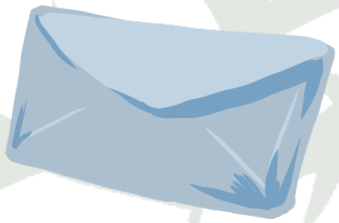
He tensed up at the sudden muffled call of his name through the door—"Amami-san? Are you alright?"

It was Akiko, and although he was grateful that it was her and not Tsumugi, he wasn't ready to face anyone else, either. There was no use in pretending he wasn't there; she had definitely heard him. "Sorry, I'm... not feeling well. I don't want to get you sick."

They both went quiet for a minute and he was starting to wonder if she'd just left without responding, when she finally said, "I'm leaving something in front of the door for you, then. I hope you feel better."

Rantarou strained to hear the light sound of her footsteps fade away down the hall. He remained still for another few minutes, clutching his knees to his chest, before his curiosity won out. He opened the door to find a few packaged snacks he recognized from the facility vending machines, with a folded piece of scrap paper resting on top.

He brought them into his room and shut the door again, fingertips tracing the folded edge of the paper. Akiko had her own issues, he knew, and he wasn't particularly close to her before her death. But he hoped they could become friends for real, now, and not just by association—the way every season's cast were "friends."

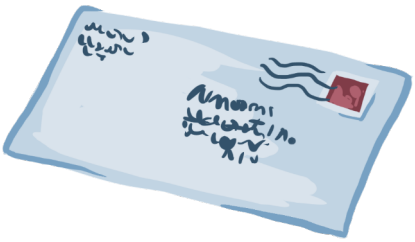


Rantarou unfolded the letter.

Dear Amami-san,

I know what people are saying about my death,

and I want you to know that I don't blame you. I was never cut out for a killing game. If it wasn't then, I'm certain I still wouldn't have made it til the end. I watched the sixth trial when it aired, and I'm glad you were there to lead the others out.



I hope you can manage to meet my eyes again someday.

Please eat something.

Sincerely, Akiko.

A SHOW FOR THE SURVIVOR

art and fic by Sealpotato • Table of Contents

When Rantaro opened his eyes, he could see nothing but darkness. The back of his head throbbed with unbearable pain, but his strong desire to piece together his current situation helped him cling onto consciousness. Mere moments ago he had still been in the library, investigating a strange camera taped to a bookshelf. He remembered hearing something heavy crash onto the floor right next to him, though he never got the chance to have a closer look at what it was. The next moment, everything went black. Now he found himself here, wherever "here" may be, with a splitting headache.

Rantaro sat up straight from the lying position he was in, taking care to do it slowly so as to not strain his aching head more. Instinctively, he put his hand on his scalp, closest to the source of the pain. The deep dent he felt definitely wasn't there before. A shiver ran through him when he realized he felt some kind of fluid against his fingertips as soon as he placed them on the supposed injury. Rantaro could only hope that he was just sweaty from the tension, but he couldn't help but feel like something had gone very, very wrong. If only he could see anything...

As if that thought triggered it, a screen flashed in front of Rantaro's face right at that moment. It seemed to float in the air like some sort of hologram. The blue light emitting from it was fairly dim, but it still made Rantaro squint in discomfort after his eyes had adjusted to the pitch black space that had been surrounding him for who knows how long. Despite this, he was quickly able to distinguish the figure that was displayed on the screen. Monokuma's creepy grin was, unfortunately, all too familiar.

"Puhuhu, looks like it's game over for you, kid! What a shame!"

“Game…over?” Rantaro mumbled, his thoughts and vision still hazy.

“But look on the bright side”— Monokuma ignored him—“you got murdered right before the deadline! Everyone would have died if it weren’t for you! You should be proud!”

“Right…the deadline…my one opening to catch the mastermind…” Rantaro slowly pieced his memory back together. “The entire reason why I went to the library…but that camera…”

Suddenly, it struck him what Monokuma had just said.

“Hey, hold on!” Rantaro uttered. “What do you mean I got murdered?”

The light from the screen didn’t allow Rantaro to see very far around him, but it was enough for him to confirm what he had feared: his hand was covered in blood, undoubtedly his own.

“Hmm? What are you so surprised about?” Monokuma questioningly tilted his head sideways. “It’s simple. You joined a killing game, and you died thanks to one of your backstabbing buddies. It’s part of the show, that’s all there is to it!”

“Show? What are you on abou—”

Monokuma interrupted before Rantaro could finish his question.

“Don’t worry though! You’re getting a front row seat with plenty of snacks and drinks to enjoy the rest of the game in real time, entirely free of charge! Whether you want to or not! So kick back, relax, and watch the heart throbbing drama unfold! Puhuhu!”

“I’m not following any of this…but I just gotta stay calm,” Rantaro reassured himself quietly, unaware that his expression was anything *but* calm. “I’ve been through worse. This is nothing a little bandaging can’t fix. I can’t be dead if I’m here, can I? If I got into this room, there’s gotta be an exit.”

Rantaro was just about to attempt to stand up when his attention got drawn to a second screen. It popped up next to the first one as soon as Monokuma's final burst of laughter died down. He recognized the place it was showing. It was the library.

A crowd consisting of his classmates stood cramped into a corner. They seemed to be surrounding something, but Rantaro could not distinguish what it was. He decided to shift his focus to the chattering voices. The first one he heard was Tsumugi's.

"We need to do this. So poor Rantaro won't have any regrets...and so we can survive."

Shuichi quickly followed up.

"Yes...let's find the culprit who killed Rantaro."

"The culprit who killed Rantaro..." Rantaro repeated to himself. Hearing one of his classmates say that, hit him quite differently than before with Monokuma. It all started feeling much more real. And when his classmates started going off on their own to investigate, he finally got a clear view of what had been hidden from his sight until now.

It was, seemingly, his own body, lying motionless on the floor.

The gaping head wound and the blood splatters on the bookshelf made it impossible for him to dismiss the seriousness of the situation any longer.

Rantaro felt sick to his stomach, but quickly swallowed to push that feeling away. A little lightheaded, he called out to the people on the screen.

"Kaede! Shuichi! I'm right here! I'm alive!"

He reached out to them, his hand passing right through the hologram.

"Idiot. Of course they can't hear you," Rantaro scolded himself. "So what was it Monokuma said? 'Enjoy the rest of the game?'

Seems like watching the others is what I need to do from here on out. But they seemed to be pretty capable. Well...most of them did. If I'm still located somewhere in the academy, I trust that they'll find me. It'd be best to save my energy for now."

As the investigation went on, more and more screens popped up, each one picturing a different room in the academy. It was quite convenient, because it showed what everyone was up to all at once. The only places missing were the bathrooms and everyone's private bedrooms, but Rantaro figured that that was for the best. Although he could have sworn that there were more classrooms than there were being shown, too. He did find the whole thing strange, as he had no recollection of any security cameras being around. He didn't want to overthink every little detail though, for the sake of his own sanity.

Eventually, the investigation came to a close. The general consensus seemed to be that the shot put ball that was found at the scene had to be the murder weapon, but Rantaro was skeptical.

"That shot put ball must have been that thing I heard crashing down. But it missed me, I remember that...so what's up with that bloody one? I don't remember seeing anyone else in the library, but it's not impossible that someone snuck up on me while I was distracted by that camera. Hmmm...if I understood this whole thing correctly, it's time for a trial now, yeah? I'd love to learn more about this friendly neighborhood murderer that's lurking around campus. Let's see how this goes."

Rantaro followed the course of events closely. The trial progressed steadily and evidence started pointing to Shuichi being the culprit. A few arguments were thrown around that suggested the mastermind could have committed the murder from their secret room, but those were quickly refuted by Kaede, with support from Shuichi himself here and there. Rantaro wished she didn't do so, because he knew that the hidden door was the most likely answer to it all. But especially when Shuichi jumped in and unraveled that Kaede was the one

behind this sneaky setup, the story just made too much sense to be doubted by the rest of the class. Up until every last detail, the evidence held up. There was just one very important exception. The fatal ending. Kaede's shot *missed*. Rantaro was certain of it.

"There *has* to be something that everyone overlooked. Kaede isn't the culprit!"

And yet, the verdict was loud and clear, personally approved by Monokuma.

Guilty.

Rantaro was powerless to do anything but observe as the ultimate pianist was forced to play her final performance before the curtain fell for her one last time. Rantaro had hoped he could've seen her in concert once they escaped this place, but this was not what he had in mind. The injustice of this undoubtedly invalid execution weighed heavy on his heart.

"Monokuma, you can hear me, yeah?" Rantaro called out. "You're a coward. I know whoever is controlling you did this to me. You used Kaede's plan to help yourself get off the hook, and you think you can get away with it, right? Don't forget that you're dealing with a class of ultimates. They'll find the truth eventually. And even if you somehow set them up to fail again, there's still me. I still got fight in me. You're going down. No matter what."

Those were some big words, which he admittedly wasn't entirely sure about, given his current condition. There was no reply, either. Not even any mockery. But it didn't matter to Rantaro. He was just glad to feel a bit of relief after letting his frustration out. But it wasn't enough to release him from his grief for Kaede's death. She never realized she was innocent. She died believing that she was a murderer. Her plan was certainly wrong, but ultimately, she had no blood on her hands. He wished more than anything that he could tell her that personally. He could never forget her actions, but he'd definitely be willing

to forgive her.

Rantaro's classmates all scattered from the trial ground, clearly feeling just as down as he did. There'd been a bit of a struggle between Kaito and Shuichi, but Shuichi seemed to have been able to pull himself together. Rantaro followed him through the video footage as he made his way back to the school building. It didn't take him long to realize where the detective was headed.

Rantaro looked away. He didn't want to intrude on Shuichi's privacy while he was mourning Kaede's loss. He'd noticed that those two were getting along well; even going as far as to flirt over a murder investigation. He chuckled and shook his head. As grim as this whole situation was, Rantaro decided to keep hoping to find some kind of explanation. The execution might have been staged, just like his murder seemed to have been. Kaede could be in the exact situation that he was currently forced into, stuck in a dark room only to watch the game unfold. That was the thought he wanted to believe in. It wasn't very pleasant, sure, but it was better than being dead.

The day soon drew to a close. Rantaro decided to lay down and get some rest, taking a much needed break.

When he woke up again, he felt refreshed. Judging from the events happening in the live footage (everyone was eating together in the dining room), he figured it was morning.

He raised an eyebrow in surprise when he noticed that Shuichi wasn't wearing his trademark hat anymore.

"That look ain't half bad. I don't know why exactly, but he seems more confident somehow. Good for you, Shuichi. Hang in there."

Rantaro decided to make use of his renewed energy to try and find an exit.

"I need to make it out of this place and find the others, to prove

that I'm still alive and to expose this game for the sham it is."

Rantaro attempted to find any sign of an opening, something he could use to get out of his confinement, but there was nothing. Not a single nook or cranny gave way, and there weren't any objects apart from the food, drinks and restroom that Monokuma had provided him. Nothing he could use to break out. After inspecting the entire room thoroughly a couple of times, he came to the conclusion that he was truly stuck in this place for the time being. But the fact that he searched everything to the best of his abilities did ease his conscience a bit. He figured that his next best bet was to watch the live feed for any kind of clue or progress on the side of his friends, if he could even call them that after spending such a brief period of time with them. He did realize that Monokuma could be manipulating the footage, showing him things that weren't really happening or hiding incriminating evidence that could compromise the mastermind's identity. After all, he still had no idea who his actual 'murderer' was. But unfortunately it was the only connection to the outside that he currently had, so he had no choice but to rely on it for now.

For a while, things seemed to be going relatively fine. Everyone spent their time as best they could. To Rantaro's surprise, Shuichi and Kaito had even started working out together, though it was obvious that Shuichi was putting in a lot more effort than Kaito was. But as much as he wanted to call this injustice, deep down he knew that he would have been slacking off too.

Rantaro did wonder when the others would finally get to visit the rest of the school. He knew that the school reached far beyond the two floors that everyone currently had access to. He clearly remembered the map of the school he had on his monopad. It was the same monopad that he'd been carrying with him on that fateful day, which had been nowhere to be found during the investigation. There was no doubt in Rantaro's mind that the real culprit was behind that disappearance, too. It made sense. That information could have been used against

them if anyone else had seen it. The more Rantaro thought about it, the more he realized that the culprit had everything planned to a T.

"Making use of Kaede's plan that no one else knew about, hiding evidence that no one else should have considered unusual...and getting away with all of it. There's no way that my attacker wasn't the one orchestrating this game."

Rantaro decided to try and pinpoint possible suspects. He didn't get very far however, as his attention got drawn to the footage in the gym. There was some kind of magic show going on, hosted by Angie and a very nervous Himiko.

"So Himiko is finally gonna show off her skills, huh? Man, that really brings me back, I used to love magic shows when I was little. 'Course I know that magic isn't real now, but watching to learn new tricks is still fun. Always gotta stay one step ahead of my sisters to entertain them." He smiled. "Let's see what you got then, Himiko."

The trick that was about to happen however, was something Rantaro wished he'd never witnessed.

Ryoma was gone, devoured by hungry piranhas.

The first thing Rantaro thought back to was the conversation they had in the dining hall, when Ryoma was insisting on sacrificing himself for the others. Rantaro remembered how relieved he was after he'd finally managed to change Ryoma's mind. But that's exactly why his passing at this time hurt so much more. He finally found some sort of motivation to keep going, but his life was ultimately still cut short. Trying to push his frustration about this aside, Rantaro thought back to the footage he'd seen before this, but he didn't remember seeing anything suspicious. He couldn't believe Himiko was the culprit though. This was obviously a setup.

As it turned out in the trial, most of the crime was carried out during the night, when Rantaro and most of the others were

sleeping. The culprit was Kirumi, which came as a shock to Rantaro. She'd always been so kind and helpful. She reminded him a lot of his own family's maid from back in the day. Though her crime still wasn't as big of a shock as the motive she had. It had all been for the greater good of the entire country. Weighing the lives of a handful of classmates against that, it was clear to Rantaro why Kirumi decided to go for the kill. He could never excuse murder, but part of him felt that it might have been better if she got away with it. Even if purposely putting that thought into his head had been a part of her final speech too. And as if all that wasn't enough for one day, Kokichi also threw it out there that Maki was the ultimate assassin. Of course, Rantaro already knew this. There was a live feed from her lab too, after all. The only obstacle preventing anyone from entering was Maki's wrath. This, in his opinion, was more frightening than Monokuma himself.

"So...we got an assassin and the prime minister of Japan in our class," Rantaro contemplated. "That sure is somethin' else. What other kinds of twists are these people gonna throw at me?"

He would soon regret asking himself that. Several days after the second trial, the murders of Angie and Tenko took place. Korekiyo was revealed to be the culprit and a serial killer on top of that. From the start, Rantaro had found his appearance somewhat menacing, but his interest in anthropology and those eyes that showed genuine passion for his fellow humans, were aspects of him that made Rantaro believe he'd be one of the most interesting classmates to chat with. Thinking back to that now, it made his stomach turn. What if they'd become friends? That wouldn't have been unlikely if they'd met at the academy under regular circumstances. What if he'd introduced Korekiyo to his sisters one day? It was painful to even consider the consequences, considering the reasoning behind his murders.

Miu's case happened after that.

It was almost starting to feel like some sort of twisted routine.

This was the first murder that Rantaro had witnessed directly, as it happened in broad AI generated daylight. He'd seen the contents of the flashback light that Gonta and Kokichi found, and he sensed a feeling of hopelessness steadily creeping up on him. He had to keep telling himself that all of this was staged, but memories couldn't be staged, could they? Rantaro realized that Kokichi had taken advantage of Gonta's selfless nature to carry out a murder plan, even if it was more or less for self-defense. Of course, Gonta also had to bear some part of the blame, he agreed to do it after all. This whole case was just one big, sad mess.

And naturally, the murders didn't stop there.

When the power outage in the hangar happened and his camera feed got cut off, Rantaro could already tell that not everyone was going to make it through that blackout unharmed.

"Kokichi, you were insane," Rantaro sighed, hours later, as the fifth trial reached its climax and Kokichi's suicidal plan was exposed by Shuichi.

"But you were a genius, too. This might work. I'm just not sure if Kaito's the kind of guy to risk everyone's lives for this plan...If Kaito really is the one in that exisal. I feel like I can trust Shuichi's judgment though. That guy really got some skill. I wonder if he'd be willing to help me out if we ever manage to escape..."

Despite Shuichi's little charade at the end of the trial, the cat soon came out of the bag. Or in this case, the astronaut came out of the exisal. They'd gotten so close, but in the end, Rantaro's guess was right: Kaito wasn't about to put everyone's fate in Monokuma's unpredictable paws if he could help it. That was the fatal flaw in Kokichi's plan.

The remaining group of survivors had become awfully quiet without Kaito and Kokichi around. Rantaro was running out of theories too. It had been so long since the beginning, and so many tragedies had happened. It was hard to put everything

into place. The only thought Rantaro could cling onto was the fact that the mastermind had manipulated the game from the start. The mastermind could just as well have manipulated the flashback lights, the rules, the murders, the executions...That is how he reassured himself there was still a way out of this, for everyone. Even the ones that were allegedly executed or killed. He was still alive and well too, after all. So when the news came that the entire school was finally being opened up for investigation, Rantaro was immediately on edge. He was finally going to see his own lab.

In the end though, that just left him with more questions rather than answers. This room, with its gloomy atmosphere and odd, deadly props lying around, felt like the opposite of the kind of place he'd want to be at. He had no recollection of recording a video for himself either, and the things he said in those recordings were very strange.

"I'm the ultimate survivor? I wanted this killing game?" He frowned. "Somethin' isn't right here...I know that this isn't who I really am. What the hell happened to me before this game started?"

With that question constantly on his mind, the sixth trial started. Rantaro knew that his case was going to be resolved properly this time. It was time to expose the mastermind. Rantaro had a very strong suspicion about their identity at this point. Adding up all the clues he'd seen so far, there really wasn't any room for debate there. It had to be one of the remaining survivors, no matter how rough it would be to point a finger at someone who was considered a friend through all these hardships. It had to be someone who had access to the girls' bathroom to sneak into Motherkuma's room. The way things were looking right now, Rantaro figured that Tsumugi was the most likely candidate, considering she mentioned that she went to the bathroom around the time he was attacked. She never stood out to him much, so he hadn't been paying too much attention to her actions. If his suspicion turned out to be true though, he had to commend her for that strategy. Laying low and focusing on

being as forgettable as possible allowed her to never be an obvious target or suspect for, well, pretty much anything. Rantaro would usually do the same thing in unfamiliar situations, as he had done while he was still in the game with the others. He used this strategy because he was suspicious of others, but for a mastermind, it was used for the opposite reason: to avoid suspicion as much as possible. And clearly, it had been working just fine for her so far.

"I should have opened up more to the others about what I knew from my survivor perk, then we might have been able to stop this game before it even began." Rantaro sighed with regret. "I wonder how things would have wound up if I didn't choose to act all alone, for once in my life. If Shuichi and Kaede knew what I was trying to do, the mastermind couldn't have executed their plan. But now's not the time to blame myself. In hindsight, stuff like that is always easy to say."

Shuichi and the others soon managed to confirm what Rantaro had been thinking. Tsumugi, driven into a corner, finally revealed her true nature. But it was only an uphill battle from that point forward. Tsumugi seemed so calm still, even as all of her secrets were coming to light and the killing game was revealed to be tampered with from the start. Rantaro wondered to what extent she had been planning all of this. Seeing her still fully in control like that, struck a nerve with him. As if planning this killing game wasn't horrifying enough by itself, she even broke her own rule and used his "death" to execute an innocent person. Out of frustration, Rantaro took a swift swing at the screen when Tsumugi popped up again, obviously without any effect.

Then, she dropped a bombshell: this killing game was entirely fictional. Every participant, every talent, every murder, every action, it had all been written beforehand. It had been set in stone from the start. Rantaro felt that this certainly explained a lot, like how he winded up in this room, and how Tsumugi still had the upper hand at her lowest point. But at the same time, it just *didn't make any sense*. How could it? Rantaro knew that he

was a living, breathing person, with his own thoughts, motivations and memories. But those memories already were proven to be untrustworthy thanks to the fabricated flashback lights, so Tsumugi's statement was certainly a good setup to spiral into an existential crisis. Rantaro slapped his cheeks a few times in an attempt to keep his focus from falling apart.

Tsumugi then offered an ultimatum, her costumes constantly shifting as she spoke:

"Only two of you can graduate. Can you choose which two will survive? Can you choose which two will be sacrificed?"

Rantaro felt a serious case of déjà vu at that moment. And suddenly, his memories came flooding back.

"I...I remember now! I'm the Ultimate Adventurer! I took the stand in the final trial just like them... but it was a different killing game, just like I said in that video to myself. We were told to make sacrifices till two survivors were left and...and I agreed to it. I asked to be executed so my friends could live...so then why...why is this happening again?

The pieces of the puzzle started to fall into place. The sacrifice was never meant to be an execution. The sacrifice meant having to participate in a killing game all over again. His memories wiped, so he could be consumed by despair all over again. Rantaro wondered, was there no possible way out of this cycle? Even if the games were fiction, the players were still suffering. Throughout 53 seasons, no less. Nothing could justify that.

Rantaro's gaze was practically glued to the screen. His final hopes were on Shuichi, Maki, Himiko and K1b0. He didn't even care about escaping his imprisonment anymore. More than anything, he wished that no one else would have to suffer because of this so-called Danganronpa. But he had to be honest with himself: things weren't looking promising. K1b0 was out of control, Shuichi was at the end of his rope, and Maki and Himiko were simply at a loss for words, even after they all rejected the game itself. The crowd that had apparently been

watching from the start went wild. They wanted to see more killing games, more hope and despair, more Danganronpa. They were the reason that this nightmare could go on. Was this really the end, then? Would the game start all over again, just like last time?

Above all the turmoil, Shuichi's voice finally called out.

"Even if this whole story is a lie...I will use that lie to change the world!

Himiko tuned in along with him.

"Th-That's right! We're not gonna just be fiction!"

Followed up by Maki.

"Shuichi, you can change this world. Because...you're Kaito's sidekick."

Tsumugi wanted to hear none of that.

"There's no way...you can persuade them like that. They all love the killing games!"

Shuichi was about to prove that statement wrong. Rantaro watched along as he fought against the audience, countering each of their statements until there was nothing left to fight against. The fans were backing off, and Tsumugi's confidence dwindled along with them. The screens in Rantaro's room faded out, one by one.

Beyond Rantaro's expectations, the killing game was over. K1b0 was about to destroy the academy, along with everyone else.

"What's going to happen to me?" Rantaro wondered. He didn't feel scared, or worried. All he felt was relief. Part of him didn't want to die, though. Who else was supposed to bring his sisters back home?

Right then, Rantaro heard the sound of shooting and explosions outside. The ground started trembling. Instinctively, he covered his head and made himself as small as possible, in case anything collapsed onto him. It was a close call, because soon after, the wall opposite of him cracked before crashing down completely. Rantaro was met with blinding daylight, and the sight of a ruined academy in the far distance. Taking his first breath of fresh air after so long was, without a doubt in his mind, the best feeling he'd ever experienced. After the explosions died down and the dome shattered, Rantaro took a moment to reflect before he decided to explore the site, or what was left of it.

"Is my reality just fictional? Or was this supposed fiction a part of reality? Whatever it is...I know for sure that I want to go out there and continue to be the adventurer I really am. I know that I want to travel around the world again. I can't tell how much of my 'backstory' is fabricated, but...if this is how I feel, I just gotta follow my gut, yeah? My sisters are out there in the real world, too. They have to be. There's nothing I've ever been more sure of. And I won't stop searching for them until I see them again with my own eyes. That's the promise I made to myself, and I don't plan on breakin' it."

With that determination driving him forward, Rantaro stepped foot beyond the broken rubble of his former lodging. The glistening light of the world beyond the broken dome was shining from above. Were those TV studio lights perhaps? Nothing would surprise him anymore.

He heard the chattering voices of Shuichi, Maki and Himiko in the distance. And surely, if those three made it out alive after K1b0's rampage, the voices of the others, previously stowed away in their own little rooms as Rantaro was until now, would soon follow.

Rantaro had no idea what to expect from the outside world, but he was about to find out.

It was time for a brand new adventure.

LEAVE THIS WORLD, LEAVE IT ALL BEHIND

Rantarou would not consider himself the luckiest of students, nor would he consider himself one of the unluckiest, not like a certain fellow upperclassman of his. When it came to him, he was just an ordinary student with an extraordinary power as the Ultimate Adventurer.

Though, is it really that extraordinary when all he does is venture out into the wild and log his mundane research? To be quite honest, he doesn't know what he's done to deserve such a title. Either way, he supposes he should consider himself a little bit lucky for getting into Hope's Peak Academy—one of the most prestigious schools in all of Japan for teenagers who were the best of the best. Getting into Hope's Peak Academy meant you would be set for life.

Even if he's in the talent course, he doesn't necessarily stand out compared to people like Kirigiri, one of the youngest and most skillful detectives, Iruma, a genius inventor, or even Momota, the Ultimate Astronaut. He's just Amami Rantarou, Ultimate Adventurer.

Perhaps he should be grateful that he's not exactly in the limelight. The idea of being known sounds quite exhausting, to be quite frank. Having to be on your best behavior at all times with no room to fail or be anything less than perfect is something Rantarou would not wish upon anyone.

In the midst of his daydream, Rantarou ends up tripping over an uneven part of the sidewalk, a bloody, jagged gash down his knee and his jeans torn open.

"Well," Rantarou deadpans, inspecting the injury. "It could be worse." He can still move his legs and walk, and the gash is not

deep enough that he would need stitches. Tsumiki-san can patch him up right away in the nurse's office before class starts if he walks fast enough.

He stands up, dusts himself off, and goes on his merry way.

In truth, Rantarou is a simple man. He takes his inconveniences lightly and appreciates the good days for what they are. He's laid-back for the most part, but he cares about the people around him and about the bright future ahead of him.

He reaches the gates of Hope's Peak in no time, waving to his fellow peers before continuing along to the nurse's office. Tsumiki fixes his wound in an instant and hands him a couple of extra bandaids in case of emergencies.

"See you later, Amami-san!" Tsumiki says cheerly, and Rantarou gives a slight wave.

Rantarou slings his bag over his shoulders and heads up the stairs to his classroom where almost everyone is already there waiting. He takes his spot next to Akamatsu who smiles at him sweetly and makes idle small talk before she turns back to her book.

School goes just about how he'd expect it. He goes to his classes, meets up with Akamatsu and Saihara for lunch, and studies in the library before going home and tending to his siblings after homework. Momota texts him about this cool new discovery he'd found, and Rantarou texts him in reply, their conversation going back and forth until he can hardly keep his eyes open, promising to talk to Momota again right before school tomorrow.

Today was a good day. A normal start to a normal week.

... Or so he thought.

After school yesterday, Akamatsu was brutally murdered on the way home. Her mother received a call from the police last night,

and somehow the news spread like wildfire overnight.

From the time he heard about the news up until now, sitting in the bleak funeral home where Akamatsu's funeral is being held, Rantarou's memory is hazy. He doesn't know how he ended up here, he doesn't know he made it out of the door this morning knowing his best friend was fucking *dead*. It's hard to think about anything else when just inside the casket not even ten feet away from him lies Akamatsu's corpse. It's the shell of what once was, an empty husk that used to be so full of life.

He can almost hear Akamatsu's laugh in his head, almost feels the phantom touch of a punch in the arm telling him not to be so down about her death—to think only of the happy times they shared together. Rantarou frowns upon the realization that all he has left are memories. What would it be like if he forgot the saccharine sweet sound of Akamatsu's voice? The way her tongue sticks out ever so slightly when she's laughing?

It's troubling, knowing a friend met their untimely demise, but Rantarou is puzzled. Akamatsu was kind, peaceful. What kind of monster would target her? She certainly didn't deserve this; neither does anyone else.

For most of the day, his thoughts are elsewhere. He can't just sit still when Akamatsu, his best friend, *died* all of a sudden. It was only yesterday that they had lunch together and she laughed at one of Kiibo's jokes. Rantarou curses under his breath, angry that Akamatsu died, angry that there was nothing he could've done about it.

After the funeral, Saihara and Momota find him sitting on one of the benches. Rantarou is just beating around the bush. He doesn't want to go home right now, he wants to stay here, stay as close to Akamatsu as he can for now.

"Amami-kun, can we sit next to you?" Saihara asks, voice timid.

Rantarou nods, and scoots over to make room.

"We're sorry about Akamatsu," Saihara chirps. "We understand how you feel, since we were also some of her closest friends."

Rantarou doesn't answer, afraid that if he makes a peep he's going to start crying. He can't. He has to keep it together. His hands are shaky, his body runs cold, everything feels so *wrong*. Akamatsu is supposed to be here, except she isn't.

"We're going to avenge her," Momota announces all of a sudden. "We're gonna find the bastard who killed her."

Rantarou's eyes widen, alarmed. "*Huh?!* How are you going to be able to do that?"

"Listen to me carefully," Saihara says quietly, and he starts rattling off information about their plan.

Their plan is enacted after school the following day. As soon as the bell rang, the three of them bolted out of campus, adrenaline coursing through them as they made their way through the streets.

"So... we're just waiting for them to show up?" Rantarou asks, laughing slowly. He's not expecting a serious response. It's hard keeping calm in a dire situation like this. His body is full of nervous energy and his hands clench around the knife he's holding, courtesy of Harukawa and Pekoyama's arsenal.

Saihara hums. "This *is* where Akamatsu was, right?"

Momota swallows the lump in his throat. "I can... definitely see the spilled blood here."

They keep trudging forward, and in a split second, there's a loud *crash!* in front of them, a cloud of dust drifting through the air.

In front of them stands a tall, long-haired man adorned in a suit, red eyes twinkling under the light of the sunset as daylight rapidly fades into dusk. How fitting.

Momota yelps. “Who are you?!” he stammers.

“World Destroyer,” the man says monotonously, almost as if he were some kind of robot. His eyes narrow as he stares at Rantarou. “And you—” He points at Rantarou, “—Amami Rantarou, am I right?”

And at that moment, it feels like Rantarou’s life flashes before his eyes. What plays out in front of him is a scene at the library, reaching for a book to further his investigations because he doesn’t know what the hell is going on, a shot-put ball hitting him in the head and the searing pain he felt afterward as he saw the light. The sound of Shirogane’s cackle ringing through his ears, revealing herself as the mastermind in his last breaths.

He lets out a small gasp as more memories flash through his mind. Of his time in the fifty-second killing game, of moving on to the next one and being bestowed the title of Ultimate Survivor only to die as the first victim, of everything before whatever *this* is. Some sort of dream? An alternate reality? Whatever it is, Rantarou doesn’t think he wants to stay here for much longer.

Panic rises in his chest as blood rushes in Rantarou’s ears, and he can barely comprehend what happened just now. This World Destroyer is after him as if his friends weren’t enough.

“We don’t have time to waste!” Momota yells. He immediately lunges to attack whoever—or, whatever—this world destroyer thing is.

The man outsmarts Momota in an instant, firing off two bullets from the tips of his fingers into his chest. Kaito clutches his chest in pain as he tumbles backward, breathing suddenly becoming labored.

“Momota-kun!” Saihara shouts.

Momota grimaces, the sickening shade of neon pink already coating his hands. “Go, keep going, you can do this.”

Rantarou would hate to leave Momota here alone. To him, Momota is like a brother, and there's this crushing feeling in chest, gut instinct telling him that there's no way he'll make it even if Rantarou tries to save him.

Saihara and Rantarou glance at each other, knowing they have no other option. Rantarou turns around, and it seems as though their target has left the vicinity.

He couldn't have gone far, Rantarou thinks to himself. His eyes drift toward the tall building across the street right next to a large construction site. Something distant tells him to go in that direction, that he'll find the culprit here.

He's quick on his feet as he rushes toward the building, Saihara trailing close behind. They split up to scour the building until they find the culprit, the bastard who killed Akamatsu and Momota.

"You're finally here," the man says with a chuckle.

Rantarou only finds himself standing frozen in fear. There's a nagging voice in the back of his head telling him to *just attack already*, to get his friends the justice they deserve. But he can't. He's entirely in shock, and his feet aren't cooperating with his brain.

"What the hell did you do to my friends?" Saihara says angrily, fists clenched.

"I did what I had to do. And like I said earlier, it's Amami's turn next."

Rantarou gulps. "What do you want me for?"

"I've been sent to take you down, and I intend to fulfill that task," the man says simply, only serving to infuriate Rantarou more.

Saihara grunts, and he aims his gun at the man, firing off two bullets. Except the World Destroyer only deflects them with his

fingertips, one of them hitting Saihara square in the chest and the other hitting a loose pillar holding the building together.

Rantarou turns to his friend, clutching at his chest and all out of energy in the same way Momota was back on the street. His gaze turns back to the World Destroyer, who fires off another bullet at the loose pillar, sending the building collapsing in on itself with nowhere for Rantarou to turn.

His jaw drops, fear struck into his eyes as he stares the World Destroyer down. This is it, huh, this is where he's going to die, and there's no escape. Rantarou closes his eyes, bracing himself for the impact, but even when he hears the loud rumbling of the building collapsing and the pillars breaking down, he can't *feel* anything.

Rantarou opens his eyes once the rumbling has stopped. The building has turned into nothing but rubble, and somehow, Rantarou and this... World Destroyer—he still can't believe that's what he calls himself—stand in its ruins completely unscathed. In the blink of an eye, the scenery around them changes from the building in rubble and into a white void.

"Mission accomplished," World Destroyer says.

Rantarou lowers his knife, body relaxing as he shifts from a fighting stance to standing up straight. "Huh?"

"Mission accomplished," the strange being repeats. "We're in the Neo World Program. After your traumatic death in the killing games, your cognition came up with this fantastical world as a coping mechanism."

Rantarou blinks twice, slightly confused. He doesn't fully understand what all of this is, though he supposes he should accept it for what it is: a trick of the mind. A realization warms his heart, and Rantarou's lips twitch into a smile knowing there's a possibility Akamatsu, Momota, and Saihara are still alive if this reality isn't real.

"My task was to eliminate this world," the man explains. "To rid of the mental instability your mind created after your trauma in the killing games. Everything around you was created with your memories, memories of your friends and surroundings."

"You're telling me that all of this, the people around me, they're all fake?"

World Destroyer nods. "They're the ones closest to you. Your perceptions of them helped shape your interactions in this world."

"Got it," Rantarou answers. "And, uh, who are you exactly?"

"Kamukura Izuru."

The name rings familiar to Rantarou, but he can't quite place his finger on it. And before he can ask anything else, Kamukura continues on.

"Alter Ego, all assigned tasks complete," and the world disappears slowly, pixels fading away one by one.

When Rantarou wakes up, he hears a low hissing noise. He opens his eyes slowly, and right in front of him is Akamatsu, eyes crinkled as she grins wide, holding her hand out for him to take.

"You're finally awake," she says, and *oh, it's so good to hear her voice again*. "You're the last one awake."

Rantarou grabs her hand, pulling himself out of the chamber he'd been laying in. He scans the area and finds his other friends mingling around. He'll admit he's happy to know he's alive, but he's even happier knowing that his friends didn't suffer horrible fates after all.

"Hey," Rantarou says softly.

Akamatsu giggles. “Hi, Amami-kun.”

He doesn’t stop himself from leaning in for a hug, the tightest hug he could possibly give. The idea of his best friends dying, even in a fake reality, scares him a lot more than he’d like to admit. He tells himself that he’s going to give Momota and Saihara bone-crushing hugs to show his appreciation for their friendship the moment he sees them.

“Did something happen?” Akamatsu asks, her eyes full of concern.

Rantarou can’t bring himself to unpack everything that happened in the weird cognitive Neo program thing, so instead he says, “bad dream.”

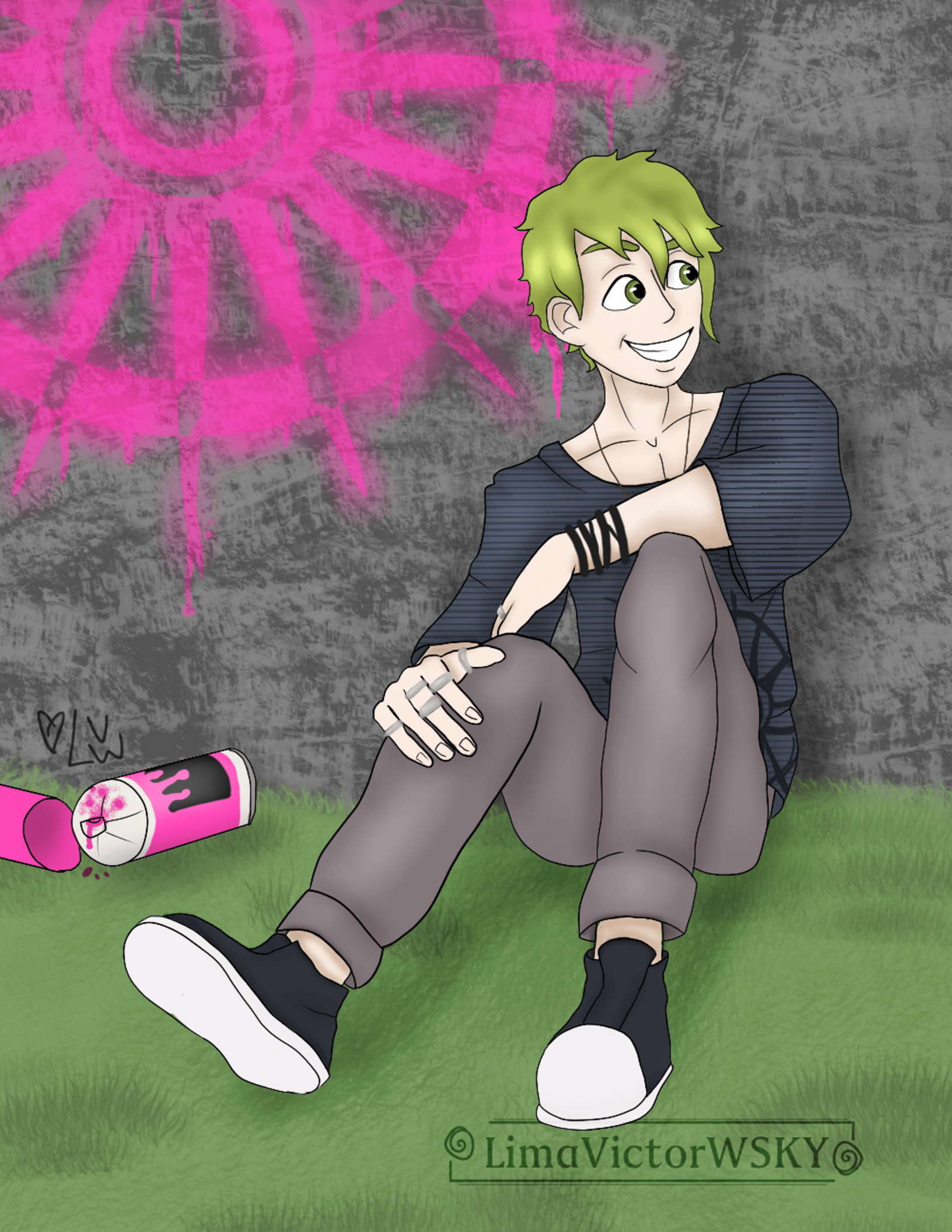
Akamatsu purses her lips, and then, “Well, I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Yeah…” Rantarou trails off. “Me too.”

“Now come on—” Akamatsu tugs on Rantarou’s arm “—we’re going to get ice cream!”

Rantarou follows Akamatsu out into the courtyard, where all of his classmates, not just Saihara and Momota are hanging around, presumably waiting for his return. Momota immediately spots him, shouting for his attention. A heartwarming feeling fills Rantarou’s chest and he can’t stop himself from grinning wildly, ecstatic that everyone is here.

There’s nowhere else he’d rather be, he thinks as he runs over and barrels into Momota to greet him.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Groaning, Rantaro opened his eyes. Sat up. Winced. Frowning, he glanced down at himself. He was wearing a striped blue shirt and brown sarouel pants. He sat on two wooden planks, which served as a bed. *Where am I?*

He was in a cramped stone room. No windows, only a steel reinforced door. A monitor was affixed to the upper corner of the room. Rantaro felt cold radiating off the stone walls. Smelled dirt. *Am I underground?*

Grimacing, Rantaro held his head. *I remember traveling back to Japan because Kokichi said he had a clue about the location of one of my sisters. So why does this look like I'm in a prison?*

The TV flicked on. "Rise and shine, ursine!" Rantaro jumped. Boots soles appeared on-screen, as if someone was lounging back in a chair with their feet up. "It's been, what? A year since graduating from Hope's Peak? I missed you sooo much that I organized a little class reunion, just the two of us!" The person removed their feet, revealing their face.

Rantaro narrowed his eyes. "Kokichi."

The leader sat in a swivel chair, a stone wall behind him. Elbow on the chair arm, Kokichi propped his head up with the palm of his hand. "Nee-heehee! I don't suppose you've changed your mind and wanna join my organization?"

Rantaro flung aside the bed's blanket and stood. "I'm sorry, but no. I have to find my sisters."

Humming, Kokichi spun his peaked hat around with a fingertip. He was fully outfitted in leadership regalia, complete with a cape and buttons polished to a shine. "Hmm... y'know, you're

so focused on finding your sisters, but did you ever wonder what would happen when you met them? How mad they are at you for abandoning them?"

Rantaro clenched his fists. Glared.

"You suuuure you don't wanna join? What if finding your sisters and joining my organization is one and the same?"

"Look, I like a good joke as much as the next guy, but kidding around about that.... Wait." Rantaro froze. "You don't mean to say you'll only share your clue if I join. Blackmail, that's your angle?"

Kokichi's grin stretched unnaturally. "Oh, it's much worse than that. It's...." A small arm pulled Kokichi's uniform. He swatted it away. "Stop it. The past year, I've been searching—h-hey!"

A young girl climbed into Kokichi's lap. She smiled at the camera. "Hi, Taro-nii!"

Gasping, Rantaro's hands flew to his mouth. His eyes welled with tears. "Umi?"

"That's right!" cried Kokichi. Turning aside, Kokichi made a sweeping gesture behind him. The rest of Rantaro's sisters stood there, wearing DICE uniforms. They glared at the camera. "I located your sisters and recruited them into my organization!"

Rantaro stilled. "You... you found them all? And they joined your... Hold on a second."

Kokichi examined his nails. "Y'know at school, everyone gushed over you. You were so good at everything and yet you whined about not finding your sisters. But didja even try? You'd travel the world to find them but really—and let's be honest here cuz I hate liars—you were just going on vacations, weren't you?"

"That's enough," Rantaro said in a low voice.

"Oh, did I hit a weak spot? Well, I'm so amazing I located

aaaall of your sisters and didn't break a sweat." Arms behind his head, Kokichi lounged in the chair. "And they love me! I'm their big brother now. But for the brother who abandoned them in the big bad world...." Grinning, Kokichi sliced a finger across his neck.

Rantaro paled.

"So, generous leader that I am," Kokichi continued, "I'm giving them a chance to exact revenge! You're going to undergo four dangerous trials run by your sisters. If you survive, well, let's just say there's a biiig surprise at the end!"

Stepping forward, Rantaro pressed a hand to his chest. "My sisters! I know you're angry and upset. But believe me when I say I never stopped searching for you!"

"Save your breath." Kokichi picked up Umi and handed her to someone off-screen. Megane, the eldest Amami daughter.

Rantaro winced. He could still vividly remember their last conversation together.

On-screen, Megane's eyes flashed behind her glasses. "I'll never forgive you."

Kokichi hit a button. Groaning, the steel door to Rantaro's cell opened. "Now, let the killing game begin." The monitor shut off.

Rantaro studied the doorway. Beyond was only darkness. *Trials? What was he talking about?* The adventurer clenched his fists. *No matter how dangerous, I have to face my sisters. I have to right my wrongs!*

Rantaro plunged into the dark hallway. Shoulders tense, he stepped through a doorway at its end. He entered a room so filled with stuffed animals he could barely see the floor. Painted trees and smiling suns decorated the walls.

"Uhh..." *Danger? This is a playroom. Did Kokichi buy all this for them?*

“Taro-nii!” Umi sat at a child-sized table to the side. The seven-year-old wore a unicorn horn headband and a tutu over her DICE uniform. “Can we play together?”

Chiru, the second youngest, stood on a small stage to the right, performing cheers with pom-poms. Purple and pink ribbons ran through her pigtails. “We can’t play now, Umi. Kokichi onii-chan said we gotta do a trial. Pika, give me a C-H-E-E-R!”

Pika sat against the opposite wall with her knees up, bashing buttons on a GBA. She wore a backwards baseball cap, a white open jacket over a black shirt, and pants. Wincing, she put a finger in her ear. “So noisy... Uproar is super effective on me.” The ten-year-old sighed. “Well, if it’ll get you to be quiet, I guess I can lend a helping hand for a few turns.”

A lump formed in Rantaro’s throat. “I’m so happy you’re all here....”

Pika passed Rantaro, heading to the stage. “Wouldn’t celebrate just yet. The others are really mad.... Well, you’ll see I guess.”

Beaming, Chiru handed Rantaro pom-poms. “If you do a good job cheering, you’ll pass our trial and can leave the room!” She pointed to another steel reinforced door near the back corner. Chiru hit the play button on a stereo. “Ready? Then 5, 6, 7, 8! Give me an O-N-I-I-C-H-A-N!”

Waving pom-poms, Rantaro chanted and posed along with his sisters. While Chiru performed flawlessly, Pika cheered in a monotone voice, and Umi giggled whenever she bumped into her brother. Rantaro tried to copy their movements, but was always a half beat behind.

Frowning, Chiru crossed her arms. “Onii-chan, you’re not very good at this.”

“Oh yeah?” Rantaro set his hands on his hips. “But what if I showed you my super-secret special move?” Rantaro pointed his index finger off his forehead like a horn, placed his pom-pom

behind his back, imitating a tail, and spun around.

Umi tackled Rantaro, squealing, "Unicooooorn!" Startled, Rantaro tumbled offstage. The plushies everywhere cushioned his fall. Umi and Chiru jumped on Rantaro, laughing and giggling.

"Oof...!" Groaning, Rantaro waved them off. "Haha, I think that's enough excitement for now. But this was fun, yeah?"

Biting her lip, Pika hung back. "D-do you really think goofing off would make us happy? You left us in the wild for so long."

Rantaro approached Pika. Placed his hand on his knees. "I know it isn't enough. I remembered how much you love Pokémon, so I captured all the legendaries of every game, including store exclusives. All for when we'd meet again." Smiling, Rantaro held up a fist. "I can't even begin to apologize for taking so long to find you, but I'm here now. Let's have a Pokémon battle later, okay?"

Slowly a grin bloomed across Pika's face. She fist-bumped him. Placing a hand to a coms. device in her ear, Pika said, "All clear." The steel reinforced door opened.

Rantaro frowned. *Who is she talking to? Kokichi?*

Pika crossed her arms. "This was only the first Elite Four. Battles will only get harder from here on out. So... do your best, Onii-chan! I wanna cream you!"

Rantaro nodded. Hand raised in a wave, he ran through the door. Passed into an even larger space. Along the far wall was a stage with flashing strobe lights and a runway. Like a store, circular clothing racks with stylish clothes were spread across the room. Lilac neon tubes outlined the dark purple walls and stage, giving the room a futuristic mall atmosphere.

On the runway's end stood Rantaro's fourteen-year-old triplet sisters. The eldest, Tsunade, jumped off the stage. She had short

spiky red hair and her DICE uniform had torn short sleeves and shorts. Tsunade put her hands on her hips. “Tch! Call me surprised ya haven’t bolted like a frightened jackrabbit.”

Moé, the middle sister, giggled. She had long, dark green hair and wore a dress uniform. The soft lilt of her voice carried in the spacious room. “B-but since he didn’t, we can hold a fashion show.”

Fasshon jabbed a finger at Rantaro. Blue and pink streaks ran through her twin hair drills. She wore a crop top with a tight black undershirt and skirt. “Like, OMG! I won’t be outshined by someone who just suddenly appeared on the runway, waltzing into our lives. You may look good, but, like, Japan’s top model is gonna be me!”

Hand behind his head, Rantaro laughed. “This is just like you guys.... I remember you three were always begging me to play Pretty Pretty Princess with you as kids.”

Gasping, Moé clamped her hands over mouth. Eyes welled with tears. “Wh-why are you laughing? Do you think we can’t beat you? Wahhhhh!” Sobbing, Moé rubbed her eyes.

Fasshon stomped a boot. “Whoa, making Moé cry is not cool. Totally unpogchamp of you!”

“You punk!” Tsunade punched Rantaro in the stomach.

“Urk!”

“Stupid, Tar,” Tsunade muttered, using her nickname, which compared Rantaro to sticky black tar. “Haven’t changed at all.”

Tsunade and Fasshon turned Moé around and guided her towards the clothing racks. Over her shoulder, Tsunade called, “Let’s git this trial done with. We have ten minutes each ta pick out an outfit from the selection. Best outfit wins.”

Shaking his head, Rantaro turned to a circular rack of clothes. All were men’s clothing near his size. The other half of the room

were young girl outfits in their size and style. Rantaro frowned. *Kokichi went through great lengths to set this up.... Surely there must be more reason than appeasing my sisters. But what?*

Behind him, the triplets tried choosing an outfit. Moé held up a red dress with a sweetheart neckline and bow to Tsunade. "Th-this is cute."

Tsunade blushed. "Q-quit it, I ain't a baby!" Moé's lower lip trembled. "Oh, shoot, don't cry."

Fasshon held up a striped tie and polka dot shirt. "No, go bold!"

Biting her lip, Tsunade ducked her head. "I ain't feminine or a fashionista. I'm just a stupid tomboy. I won't look good no matter what I wear."

"Now, that just isn't true."

A cowboy hat was placed atop Tsunade's head. She looked up to Rantaro standing behind her. The Amami brother handed Tsunade Moé's dress and Fasshon's tie. Tsunade balked. "I... I can't wear this stuff!"

"Why not? They'd suit you. Cute but a bit of a rough 'n' tumble look. Not many could pull that off, yeah? And afterwards, if you'd like, I can style your hair and paint your nails."

Eyes wide, Fasshon clapped her hands. "OMG, OMG, OMG that would be amaaazing! I can't get my drills right; they fall apart after a couple hours. And hair's, like, one thing I ultra gotta nail to be a model."

Moé blinked. "Y-you always pushed us away when we asked you to paint our nails as kids...."

Face red, Tsunade looked away. "W-well, that'll hafta wait for another time. Our big sises are waiting for ya, Tar." Giving the order over coms. device, Tsunade opened the reinforced doors.

Fasshon raised her hands, cheering, "Uwu!"

Rantaro winced. *Was that supposed to be "Woohoo"?*

Turning to Tsunade, Rantaro asked, "I thought whoever picked the best outfit was supposed to win? I'm not wearing anything special."

"Stupid. *I'm* in the best outfit now, and it was yer pick."

Moé clasped Rantaro's hands with both of hers. Smiled warmly. "Go on and win so we can have more fun together later, okay?"

"Will do."

Leaving the triplets behind, Rantaro passed through the doors. Before him lay a cozy, small karaoke room. A TV played a pop concert. The song blared from overhead speakers. Like a disco ball, circular lights were projected onto the dark walls. The lights pulsated different colors in time with the beat. Even the table glowed neon yellow.

Saba sat on one of the poofy couches flanking the table, a sheathed saber in her lap. Epaulettes hung off her crisp, double-breasted uniform. Eyes wide, she lowered her teacup. "Ah, the prodigal son. Let me get a good look at you." She studied him. "I'm unimpressed. You should have stayed lost."

Rantaro stepped back. *What didn't she like?*

Karako, her 16-year-old twin, sang and danced before the TV. She waved at Rantaro.

Emao, who was a year younger than them, sat in the back corner reading a book. Her long dark hair completely covered one eye. She had wrapped a black cape around her DICE bodysuit uniform. "Ugh, all this noise is disturbing the cosmic balance. And pissing me off."

Karako flung her fists up and down, side ponytail bobbing. Her

uniform resembled Hatsune Miku's with its detached sleeves and skirt. "Aw, c'mon guys. Get PUMPED! There's our reunion with brother, dangerous trials, and Gustin Dieber's sexy voice. How can you not be psyched?"

Saba sipped her tea. "The only dangerous thing is how much of a bimbo you are."

Emao groaned. "Can't I devise a hex for people who pour milk before cereal in peace?"

Huffing, Karako pointed her microphone at Emao. "No! It's karaoke trial time. I won't accept Ran-chan as my brother unless he loves Gustin Dieber more than anyone else, including family!"

Rantaro raised a brow. "Well, that's not healthy."

"Let's begin!" Fist in the air, Karako swayed to a pop song. She matched pitch for pitch but screeched a little on the high notes. Saba belted the notes as if for a marching chant. Emao was so tone-deaf, Karako yanked the mic from her hand and shoved it towards Rantaro.

Arms crossed, Karako smirked. "I put on Dieber's best single for you to sing. It's tragically overlooked so only the truest of fans would know—"

Moving to the groove, Rantaro began, "There's gonna be one less lonely girl...."

Karako gasped. "Those moves.... That's the DDR dance!" Her eyes welled with tears. "You used to get annoyed at me singing Dieber all the time, but you learned a whole dance routine of his...." Sobbing, Karako covered her eyes with an arm. "Today I've learned the true meaning of never gonna give you up or let you down!"

Saba coughed into a fist. "You went AWOL for a long time, but just as easily one could say we deserted you, having disobeyed

your orders and getting lost. So long as we both keep reaching for new feats, then your commander is satisfied. Not that you're capable."

Looking away, Emao clutched her dark arts book to her chest. "Sappy stuff, not my thing."

Rantaro smiled. "What about doing horoscopes or going to a cat café with me instead?"

"Horoscopes, no. Cat café, yes. Should be soothing for my cosmic soul spot."

"Haha, sounds like a plan."

Speaking into her ear com., Karako unlocked the exit. "Good luck, Ran-chan. The next trial is uber hard...."

"I'll be fine. After coming this far, I can't stop here." Rantaro stepped through the doors. *All right, final trial. Will Megane be there?*

Squinting at the bright lights, Rantaro gazed into the room. Gasped. A full-length basketball court stood before him. Bay lights shone down from overhead high beams. Rolled mesh carts full of basketballs and volleyballs sat in the back. A staff-only door stood next to the reinforced double doors. His shoes squeaked on the waxed floor. Voice echoed. "Whoa..." *A full underground basketball court? Kokichi really did pull out all the stops.* "Wait." Something in the middle of the court caught his eye. His stomach sank. "Why is there a net?"

Two young women wearing DICE jerseys stood on the court, one holding a basketball, the other a volleyball. They pointed at Rantaro, chorusing, "That's because we're playing...

"Basketvolleyball!"

"Volleybasketball!"

Growling, they glared at each other.

Rantaro exhaled. *Ah, Riko and Saeko ...*

The seventeen-year-old, Riko, shook her head, tossing her short brown bangs. "Look, everyone knows basketball is far more intense than volleyball by getting up close with the opposing team."

"Aren't ya cute?" Laughing loudly, Saeko patted Riko's head. The elder sister had spiky blond hair and makeup. "Volleyball takes skill, timing, and familiarity with all positions. In basketball, you just mindlessly bounce a ball and throw it around."

Riko smiled wide, mouth twitching. "Oh, is that so?" She seized Saeko's wrist in a vice grip. Saeko stuck her tongue out.

Hands raised, Rantaro stepped onto the court. "Name of the trial aside, it's good to see you. What would you like me to play?"

Saeko tsked. "Don't look down on us. This is a test to see how much of a man you are!"

Smirking, Riko dribbled the basketball. "In basketvolleyball, you have to both serve volleyballs and make baskets to score. Team with the most points wins. With my trained eye, I can scan your physique and see you don't make the cut. But maybe you'll surprise me. Let's see it!"

Rantaro froze. "W-wait, both at the same time? How can you throw a basket with a net and from halfway across the court?"

"So? I know a miracle worker who can score from the other side of the court!"

Saeko tossed the volleyball up and down. "Remember, we won't forgive you for leaving us unless you pass all four trials."

Rantaro's heart pounded. "What exactly do you expect from two versus one?" Rantaro threw a hand to the side. "This'll be more like dodgeball slaughter. It's impossible."

"Get ready!" shouted Riko.

What do I do?

"That's enough!" a new voice cried.

The shout's echo rang throughout the court. Everyone turned.

Megane strode through the double doors, footsteps resounding. Her crisp vest and long skirt flowed around her. Dark green hair was tied back in a loose, low braid. "You may have charmed the others...." Megane adjusted her glasses, eyes boring into Rantaro. "But I won't forgive you. I know your true nature underneath that smiling façade."

Megane... Eyes closed, Rantaro dipped his head. *Not a day goes by that I don't regret the words I said back then.*

A year before attending Hope's Peak, Rantaro stood on the deck of his father's moored ship. The cityscape's windows glowed like fireflies. On the deck behind him, string lights had been strung. Rowdy teenagers—sons and daughters of friends of his father's company—danced, laughed loudly, and blared the stereo. Punch glass in hand, Rantaro leaned against the railing, gazing down at the moon's reflection on the water.

Megane emerged from below deck. She wore a harlequin patterned dress with pearls around the waist and trim. Spying Rantaro, she approached him. "There you are, I've been—what are you wearing?"

Rantaro had thrown on a V-neck and wrinkled cargo shorts from the bottom of his drawer. He shrugged. Glanced over his shoulder at Megane. "Could say the same to you."

Misty-eyed, Megane rubbed the dress's sleeve between her fingers. "Fasshon picked it out, ever hopeless at style. Not that her older brother cared to teach her whenever she asked."

Exhaling, Rantaro hung his head. “Megane, enough. We’ve been through this so many times. They’re gone, okay? They’re all gone.”

“So what? We’re supposed to pretend they never existed?”

“Hey, Ran!” Across the deck, a guest raised his glass. “We’re about to play spin the bottle. Come on!”

Rantaro’s bangs overshadowed his eyes. “What else can we do? Searching for them on our own is crazy. We have to enjoy life without them. Face it, Meg.” Rantaro chugged his punch. Pushing off the railing, he approached the party-goers, passing Megane.

“We’ll never see them again.”

Megane whipped around, green eyes flashing. “I rather live a short life searching for them than living a lifetime without them, schmoozing up to strangers!”

Lips parted, Rantaro stared. Everyone quieted. Braid flying, Megane ran below deck.

The next morning, someone had stolen some of their father’s money. Megane was nowhere to be found.

Head bowed, Rantaro closed his eyes. His soft voice carried throughout the court. “Megane, you have every right to be angry. To put me through as many trials as you like.” Eyes as hard as flint, Rantaro pressed a hand to his chest. “But I’m not the brother I used to be. After you left, I realized how empty my life was. I traveled the world searching for everyone. I played Pokémon, learned how to paint nails and style hair, listened to all of Gustin Dieber’s—”

“Such trivial things mean nothing!” Hands trembling, Megane balled her skirt. Tears welled. “You’re too late. I—Huh?”

The ground rumbled. Gasping, Rantaro backed up. Shot a wide-eyed glance at Saeko and Riko. *What's going—?*

A giant machine burst through the back wall. Its hand seized Megane and lifted her in the air. She screamed. Across the coffin-shaped cockpit was the word "Exisal." Machinery humming and whirling, it towered over them. "Surpriiiise!" boomed Kokichi's voice. "Miss me?"

Gasping, Riko dropped her basketball. "Kokichi onii-san?"

Eyes wide, Saeko started. "Wh-where did you get that...?"

Rantaro glared. "Let her go!"

"Sure! Anything for my beloved Rantaro. Actually, nope. That's a lie. Facing me is supposed to be the prize for surviving all the trials! I'm the elite four champion! But I got bored with waiting."

"Megane onee-chan!"

The remaining Amami sisters, led by Karako, rushed into the basketball court through the double doors. At the sight of Megane kidnapped, Moé started crying. Tsunade thrust a finger. "Hey! Whaddya think yer doing to my sister?!"

Umi squeezed Pika's hand. "I thought we were family, Kichi onii-chan."

"Family, ha!" The Exisal waved a hand. "Honestly? I couldn't care less about you! You're just tools for me to get my vengeance against Rantaro!"

Rantaro's eyes widened. "Me? What did I do to you?"

"Oh, I'll tell you, Mr. Adventurer. You were always so aggravating back at Hope's Peak...."

Laughing, Kokichi raced up to Kaito in the hall and shoved him.

Walking backwards, Kokichi crossed his arms behind his head. "Whaddya think your chances are of passing today's history test? 30%? Oops, sorry, misspoke. I meant 3%. Nee-heehee."

Exhaling, Kaito shook his head, not even bothering to look at Kokichi. "Shut up, Kokichi. No one likes you."

Kokichi stilled. Kaito passed by him, not looking back.

"Oh, Rantaro!"

Kokichi turned to see Kaito approaching the adventurer, hand raised. "Thanks for tutoring me in history, man. I dunno how you manage traveling and keeping up with studying enough to tutor someone."

Rantaro chuckled. Ran a hand through his green locks. "I wouldn't say I'm especially smart or anything. Just trying to help a friend, yeah?"

"Rantaro!"

As the bell rang for lunch, Shuichi exited a classroom. Shuichi left Kaede's side to walk alongside Rantaro and Kaito. "We're going out tomorrow, right? Movies, fast food, and sleeping over again."

Smiling, Rantaro laid a hand on Shuichi. "Absolutely. Men's night out with the whole class. Thought it would be fun."

Kokichi watched the trio as they walked past him. "Wha...? I wasn't invited...."

Shoulders tense, Headmaster Kirigiri rounded a corner. "Oma Kokichi! You won't be getting off lightly for TP'ing the teacher's lounge."

Kokichi flinched. *Uh oh, skedaddle time!*

Laughing, Rantaro placed a hand across Kokichi's shoulders, pinning him in place. Gave a full-watt smile to the headmaster.

“Now, now, Headmaster Kirigiri. Halloween’s coming up, and Kokichi didn’t hurt anyone. Maybe you even had a good laugh. Rest assured, we’ll keep an eye on him.”

Eyes narrowed, Headmaster Kirigiri studied them for a moment. Waving a hand, he turned away. “Just clean it up by the end of the day.”

Rantaro looked down at Kokichi. “Now, Kokichi, I know being a troublemaker is your… pastime, but I’m not always going to be around to cover you. Maybe it’s time to grow up a little?” Chuckling, Rantaro patted Kokichi’s shoulder. Kaito and Shuichi snickered.

Kokichi glared.

Inside the Exisal, Kokichi spat a wad of phlegm. “Back at school, everyone was like, ‘Rantaro, you’re sooo smart!’ and ‘Rantaro, will you go out with me?’ Even the teachers were wrapped around his finger! You were the, like, Ultimate Chad and everyone was frothing at the bit for you. God, so annoying.” The Exisal lifted Megane in the air. “So I figured if I found all of Rantaro’s sisters first, made them love me, and gave them a chance to unload their aggression against you, that would show you who’s the *real* Ultimate.”

Emao snorted. “And I thought I was emo.”

“Indeed.” Saba drew her saber and pointed it at the Exisal. “That is the most pathetic reasoning I have ever heard. Allow me to put you out of your misery.”

Pom-poms raised, Chiru jumped up and down. “Fight and get Meg-nee back! I’ll cheer you on!”

“Sorry, kiddos. Love and fwendship ain’t taking down this bad boy!” Kokichi thrust the Gatling gun hand at them. Exposed wires at its joints hissed and sparked.

Rantaro tensed. “Everyone, run!”

Tsunade and Fasshon pushed a sobbing Moé to the forefront. Fasshon shouted, “Only, like, the cruelest of jerks would hurt Moé!”

Kokichi hesitated. “Huh?”

Grinning, Saba leaped onto the Gatling arm. She ran up the arm’s length, slicing the Gatling gun in two before stabbing her sword into the elbow joint. Smoke arose.

“Hey! Take it easy on the merchandise, will ya?”

Like an idol striking a pose, Karaoke threw out a hand towards her younger sister. “Emao!”

“Yeah, yeah....”

Turning on the coms. device, Karaoke’s and Emao’s screechy and tone-deaf singing of Gustin Dieber’s songs barraged Kokichi’s cockpit with sound.

Grimacing, Kokichi covered an ear with a hand. The Exisal raised a foot.

Grinning, Riko and Saeko dumped the metal mesh carts full of basketballs and volleyballs onto the floor. The Exisal stomped the foot down on several balls. The foot slid forward on them, causing the entire machine to tip backwards.

Umi jumped in the air. “Now, Taro-nii!”

Like an Olympic long jumper, Rantaro leaped onto the broken Gatling gun. Raced up the arm and drop-kicked the cockpit. The Exisal wobbled. Then, groaning, it leaned back and crashed to the ground. The entire room vibrated on impact.

Laughing, Pika, Chiru, and Umi raced forward. Hands joined, they jumped up and down on the cockpit until the door dented inwards, creating an opening.

Rantaro clomped across the machine, approaching its hand. He offered a hand to help Megane up. "You all right?" Nodding, she accepted his hand, mumbling her thanks. He pulled her up.

The Amami family gathered around the Exisal cockpit. Saba grabbed the door's exposed edge and ripped it open. Inside, Kokichi lay still, eyes closed and head turned to the side. Saeko raised a brow. "Uh, is he...?"

Eyes shooting open, Kokichi sat up. The girls flinched. Expression neutral, he blinked at them. Once, twice. Then he burst into tears. "Wahhhhhh! I... I just wanted love and attention. Aahhhhhh!"

Smiling, Moé grasped her dress. Spoke in her honey-toned voice. "D-don't cry, Kichi nee-chan. You took care of us for so long. Now we have two older brothers—"

"Nuh uh, I hate you! You're all meanies. Traitors!" Kokichi jumped to his feet and threw out a hand. "You're all fired from my organization. Fired! I want my uniforms back and dry cleaned!" Pulling down an eyelid, Kokichi stuck out his tongue. He fled through the gym's staff-only door.

Chuckling, Rantaro rubbed the back of his head. "Quite a handful, yeah? He really is like a little kid."

His sisters crowded around Rantaro, giving him hugs and congratulatory pats on the back for besting the Exisal. Head bowed, Megane hung back. Rantaro waved off his siblings. Approached her. "I'm sorry, Megane, everyone. You're right, I was too late to save you. Too slow to learn your favorite things." His grass-green eyes softened. "But I'm here now. I swear from here on out I'm going to be the best older brother I can be. And if I mess up, could you help me, Megane?" He flashed a cheesy grin. "Knock me upside the head or something."

"Th-that's...." Face flushed, Megane smiled through her tears. "That's all I ever wanted."

Karaoke fist pumped. Umi squeezed Rantaro's leg. "Yay, big brother is back!"

The Amami family embraced, their laughter, sniffing, and cheers echoing throughout the court.

After closing the staff-only door behind him, Kokichi rolled his shoulders and groaned. "Ughhh...! I hate mushy stuff like that."

A bald, rotund man wearing a DICE uniform sat before a wall of monitors. Scoffing, he sipped tea from a cup. "Another lie, hmm?"

"Yeah, well...." Kokichi set a hand on the back of the chair, gazing at the screens. The monitors showed every trial room, including the basketball court where the Amami siblings were hugging. "I know what it's like to not have a family.

"Welp, time to eat cake!" Grinning, Kokichi headed to the back door, shoving a man with gravity-defying blond hair in passing. "Do ya think we can eat all the cake by the time they're done?"

"Hell yeah, my dude! Heck, we can even have an eating contest. Whahaha!"

"Don't you even think about it. That cake is reserved for the party.... Wait, where do you think you're going? Get back here...!"

Wish you were Here!
RabbleRauser '21

We ♡ You, Brother!

A BOY WHO IS LOVED

ToxicPineapple, art by Sage • Table of Contents

"Homota, we've been driving for fuckin' ages," Miu whines, knocking her head against the back of the driver's seat.

Rantaro's lip twitches. He adjusts his own position as he watches Miu writhe in place, but he does so minutely, so as not to wake Angie, who sleeps against his arm. From the driver's seat, Kaito turns his head, tutting at her, but he can't get a word in before she's speaking again.

"This Gorgeous Girl Genius has *seriously* gotta piss, y'know, and unless you're into that, I—"

Kaito groans, "*Quit* it!" at the same time as Tenko bursts out, "Iruma-san, no!"

They stare at each other, eyebrows raised, until Tenko leans back in her seat; a silent concession.

"Quit calling me that," Kaito complains, once he's sure that he won't be interrupting Tenko again. "I told you less than fifteen minutes ago. The next rest stop isn't for another couple hours."

"I can't hold it that long!" Miu protests. "Speed or something!"

"I'm not gonna speed!"

Rantaro casts a nervous look upon the sleeping Angie, but her eyes are still closed, her chest rising and falling steadily. Either she managed to sleep through the outburst, or she was never asleep to begin with. Rantaro supposes it doesn't matter either way, so long as she disturbed. He cards his fingers through her hair, smiling softly, but glances up to follow the rest of the conversation.

"You should have gone at the last stop," Kiibo remarks,

disdainfully. Miu lets out a long whine, flopping dramatically into Kiibo's lap, and they sigh as they card their fingers through her hair.

"But I didn't have to goooo theeeeen," she complains. Rantaro swallows back a laugh.

Next to him, Shuichi's grey eyes crinkle at the edges, twinkling. "Are you regretting bringing us all along, yet?" Rantaro grins and elbows him in the side. He rubs Angie's back while he responds.

"Would you believe that I'm not?" he asks. Rantaro speaks quietly, almost wistfully, as his eyes drag up and down the aisle. He takes in his bickering friends; Miu's face scrunching up with exaggerated distress, Kaito's exasperated replies from the driver's seat, Tenko's indignant huffs whenever Miu makes another innuendo. "It's... nostalgic, actually. Familiar. Been a really long time since I've gone on a trip like this with so many people."

From the seat in front of them, Kaede turns around to speak, raising her eyebrows."A bit nerve-wracking, though, huh?" She smiles sympathetically. "You seemed worried while we were all packing up."

Well, that would probably happen no matter what. Rantaro trusts his friends with his *life*, and more importantly with their own lives, but it's hard not to be scared of losing them anyway. Not to mention that this is hardly a vacation. Rantaro's only business in the Mid-Western United States is a lead on his sister, Mina. If one of his friends got hurt—or worse, *lost*—on a trip they only went on for his sake, Rantaro wouldn't be able to take it.

But Rantaro spent all of high school and the better part of his college years pushing people away. He wasted all that time isolating himself, because he thought that he was cursed, and because he believed that it would be better for the people he cared about if he wasn't in their lives. He didn't trust them to know what they wanted if what they wanted was him.

Rantaro has lost too many people, though, to live his life in fear of it happening again. If loss is inevitable, then Rantaro wants to spend the time that he has appreciating the people around him. That's the only way to live.

"I'm still worried," Rantaro admits, and when Kaede rests a hand on his cheek, he leans into it, but smiles at her. "But I trust you guys. I know you wouldn't just wander off without telling me about it."

"Rule of threes," Shuichi says quietly. He rests his hand on Rantaro's knee, and Rantaro puts his own free hand on Shuichi's, squeezing. Shuichi's hands, smaller than Rantaro's, are cold, and Rantaro has always hated the cold, but next to the warmth of Kaede's hand on his face, and the overwhelming heat of his own, there's something comforting about it. It reminds him less of himself.

From the front seat, Kaito mutters, "Ah, shit," and Rantaro looks up, his eyebrows raising, Angie shifting against him.

"What's the matter, Kaito?"

"It's just—" Before Kaito can finish, the engine sputters, and the car comes to a sputtering halt. Kaito clicks his tongue, brow wrinkling in the rearview mirror, and unbuckles his seatbelt. "Wait in here, I'll go take a look under the hood."

Miu sits up, pulling away from Kiibo and following suit. "Lemme help ya," she says, and Kaito pouts at her as he slips out of the vehicle.

"What kind of man needs someone else to help him fix a car?" Kaito grunts, muffled through the car doors. Miu makes a face at him as she follows.

"*Someone else*—I'm an *inventor,* you dumb fuck."

They keep bickering even as Kaito lifts the hood of the car, which, though it's hard to tell through the tinted windshield,

appears to be letting off puffs of white smoke. That doesn't bode well, but frankly, Rantaro doesn't know enough about cars to be able to help. He'll just have to trust that Kaito (local man) and Miu (local mechanical expert) know what they're doing.

There's some mumbling at his side, and Rantaro glances down, watching Angie stir.

"Mmmmm..." She trails off, yawning into Rantaro's sleeve. "...what is happening?"

Angie's words slur, muffled against Rantaro's shirt. Seems she really was asleep. Rantaro keeps a hand on the top of her head as she sits up, watching Angie's nose scrunch with her second yawn. She's sweet, especially when she's sleepy like this, her eyes too clouded for that fake smile to stretch her expression just yet. It's not that Rantaro hates to see her brimming with joy as she so often is, but it's different, to see her like this. She feels closer to him, more down-to-earth, and perhaps most important, she reminds him of his sisters.

"Morning, Angie-san," Rantaro murmurs. Angie's lips quirk in a drowsy smile. "Think we're experiencing a bit of car trouble at the moment."

Tenko turns around in her seat, staring at them with wide green eyes. "Angie-san doesn't need to worry, though! Iruma-san definitely knows what she's doing! She's very good at cars!"

Angie rubs one of her eyes, yawning yet again. "Well, that is good... if that is the case, then God can just keep sleeping... no need for His assistance right now." Heh. She really is sleepy. Moving vehicles just put her right to sleep. Rantaro ruffles Angie's hair, and she makes a purring sound in the back of her throat, leaning up into the touch.

"Y-Yeah, uh, God can sit this one out!" Tenko makes an attempt at cheerfulness, though the hesitation in her voice is clear. She's never been the most devout. Rantaro really appreciates her trying, even if she probably doesn't do it for *his* sake so much

as she does it because she doesn't want to say *boo* to another girl. Much less one who's so close with Himiko. "Maybe Tenko will get out and stretch her legs, though... it's important to keep your blood pumping, especially on long car rides like this! Kaede, Kiibo, and Angie-san can come too!"

Her eyes settle on Rantaro and Shuichi, narrowing.

"And... Amami-san and Saihara-san, if they want," she adds, stiffly, which is much more charitable than she would've been back in high school. Rantaro suppresses a fond chuckle, in the interest of not getting thrown.

"That'd be nice, Chabashira-san, if you'll have us." Rantaro reaches to unbuckle his seatbelt. Angie sighs, shaking herself off, and opens her eyes again.

"Yup yup! God has said that Angie should go on a walk as well!"

Kiibo frowns. "Did you not just say that he's sleeping?"

"He said it in his sleep!"

"Ah, of course," Kiibo nods, like this is perfectly logical, as they unbuckle their own seatbelt. Rantaro has to suppress another amused sound, waiting for Tenko and Kaede to leave the car before he slips down the aisle, if only to give Angie and Shuichi more room to get unbuckled.

Distaste aside, Tenko still offers Rantaro an arm as he steps out of the van. He squeezes her arm as he steps down, and she scoffs, lifting her chin haughtily. This time, Rantaro is unable to suppress the urge to chuckle. As much as he considers Tenko to be one of his closest friends, he can't help feeling like she's here more for the sake of his sisters than she is for Rantaro himself. It's as good an incentive as any, really; Rantaro hardly deserves the help, being the one behind the disappearances to begin with, but his sisters deserve to be found. That goes without saying.

Once out standing on the pavement, Rantaro stretches his arms over his head, releasing a puff of air.

They're far out from civilization. The highway is straight and bare, stretching out endlessly before them. Under Rantaro's converse, the street is cracked and brown, and every step he takes kicks up dust that he can feel tickling the back of his throat. The plantlife out here is sparse; what few plants there are are browned and small, hardly the type to provide shade. It's a shame, because the sun is glaring down at them, not a single fluffy white cloud present in the cerulean sky.

With how warm it is, Rantaro almost wishes he was back in the car, zooming down the highway with the windows rolled down, but this isn't bad either. His skin always crawls in confined spaces, from cars to elevators to crowded squares. He needs to be out in the open, just like this; standing at the edge of a cliff, sailing in the middle of the ocean, or hiking a long, winding forest trail. It's a desire that comes as naturally to him as breathing. Even after losing his sisters, as his love for adventure began to sour, Rantaro has always needed to be outside, out in the world. He could never live in one spot, confined to a singular location, when there's so *much* out there that he hasn't seen yet.

(No matter how much of his freedom he would give up, if he could just get his sisters back.)

As Shuichi exits the van, sliding one of the doors shut, there's a loud *pop* from the engine, and then another burst of pale smoke, and a string of profanities comes from Miu as she drags Kaito to the group by his scruff. Kaito is grinning sheepishly, a smear of soot across his forehead, and Miu is fuming, muttering curse words under her breath until she comes to a stop before the group.

"So! We got good news and bad news! Which one do you virgins want first?"

"Um," Kaede's eyes dart to the van, and then to Kaito and Miu,

and then back to the van. "Good news?"

"Homota figured out how t' do somethin'. Good for him. Anyone wanna guess the *bad news?*"

"Do you gotta rub it in?"

Miu insists, *"Any takers?"*

"Kaito broke the car?" Angie guesses, brightly, her hands clasped behind her back as she pops up onto her toes.

"I didn't break the car!" Kaito protests, at the same time as Miu confirms, *"Homota broke the fucking car."*

Kaito makes a whining noise in the back of his throat. "Listen, it's been years since I took auto shop, okay? And stop calling me that!"

"Someday, Homota, *someday,*" Miu jabs a finger at the middle of his chest, "Chaba-shit-ra's gonna beat the everloving *shit* outta you, and then you're gonna realize how little it means to be a man in this world."

"Will you fight?" Shuichi whispers, from Rantaro's side. "Or will you perish like a dog?" Rantaro chokes trying not to laugh at that one.

Eagerly, Tenko pipes up, "Tenko will do it right now if Iruma-san wants!" and Kaito looks at her warily, like he's not sure he could take her in a fight.

"Let's not get too hasty," Rantaro says, so Kaito doesn't fucking die, putting out his hands in a placating gesture. "There isn't any signal out here. We're probably going to have to wait for someone to drive by and give us a hand."

"Tenko doesn't see what that has to do with her beating up Kaito."

"Maybe we should hold off on that until we're back in Japan,"

Kaede suggests. "Save it for a time when Kaito isn't needed to drive, y'know? It'll be better for Rantaro's sisters, that way!"

"Kaede is right!" Tenko agrees, at once, nodding vigorously. "Kaito lives another day!"

His arms folded across his chest, Kaito grumbles, "Thanks a lot," but at the glare he gets from Tenko, he lifts them in surrender.

Kaito's death by Tenko now delayed, Rantaro squints down the highway, lifting a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. Someone is bound to drive down the road eventually, right? They might be in the middle of nowhere, but it's not like nobody *ever* drives by here. Help should come at some point. There's no need to worry too much, even if this is a bit of a setback.

Besides, everyone is where Rantaro can see them. He does a quick head count: Kaede, Shuichi, Tenko, Angie, Miu, Kiibo, Kaito—and then looks back at the road. Things should be fine. They have enough food and water packed in their van that worst case scenario, they can camp out here for the night. It doesn't look like there's any rain in their future, so it won't be so bad. If it does start raining, they can just sleep in the car, cramped though it may be.

On the subject of cars being cramped...

"Miu," Rantaro turns to look towards his friend, "it might be better if you took your nature pee sooner rather than later. I doubt we'll be reaching that rest stop any time soon."

"Nature pee?" Miu sputters. "You're gonna make the Gorgeous Girl Genius pee in the middle of nowhere?"

Rantaro frowns. "Well, I can't *make* you do anything, I suppose, but holding your bladder can actually have really negative side effects, such as—"

"I don't wanna know!" Miu interrupts frantically. "I'll just go now! Ka-idiot, Kiibo, come with me, yeah? Rule of threes, or

whatever. Besides, I need you guys to shield my breathtaking self as I go."

Rantaro smiles inwardly. Miu always acts like she doesn't care, but she has a big heart. It means a lot to him that she was paying enough attention to remember to bring Kaede and Kiibo along with her without being prompted. He's glad he asked her to come, even if her skills went sort of wasted just now, what with the whole car debacle.

"Hmmm... Rantaro, what now?" Angie comes over to Rantaro's side, latching onto his arm and tilting her head. "God is bored. We should play a game instead of standing around like this!"

"That's a good idea," Rantaro touches his chin. "Admittedly, I wasn't expecting something like this to happen, so I don't have any games packed, I don't think... did any of you bring like, a deck of cards?"

Shuichi shakes his head, apologetically, as he says, "No, I don't think so, sorry," and the rest of the lingering group does the same. Rantaro doesn't see Miu or Kaede bringing cards along on a trip like this, but maybe he'll ask Kiibo, when they return. "I did bring a couple books, but that might be hard as a group activity..."

"What a wonderful idea, Shuichi!" Angie chirps. She bounds over to the detective and curls around *his* arm instead. Shuichi startles for a moment, but relaxes into a smile and rests a hand on top of Angie's head. "You'll read to us, won't you? Won't you, won't you?"

"Ah, you'd like that?" Shuichi's smile becomes a touch wry. "I don't know how well Iruma-san will take to being read to..."

"If we're doing storytime, then I want a girl to do it," Tenko huffs. "Tenko doesn't need to listen to a degenerate ramble on and do falsetto for the poor fictional girls. She'd rather just read over his shoulder!"

Kaito rubs the back of his neck. "We can't all read over Shu's shoulder. Wouldn't that get kinda crowded?"

"I'm sure we can find *something* to do," Rantaro says placatingly. "There's no need to stress out about it. Maybe we can start by eating lunch."

The suggestion seems to please Angie. "Ah, good idea! God is very hungry!"

"Does he get his sustenance from you?" Shuichi asks, frowning.

"He eats when Angie eats!"

Yeah, okay. This God lore is convoluted as fuck. But it's not like Angie's ever seemed to care about continuity. Regardless of how Angie's god eats, it seems as though everyone is in favour of lunch, so Rantaro walks back to the van for the sandwiches he packed earlier. He's glad this happened with company, and not while he was driving on his own. He's not sure what he would've done, alone on an abandoned highway with a broken down car. With his friends here, things seem more bearable, like this is just a brief hiccup in a larger journey.

They make him feel that way a lot, actually. Rantaro smiles as he opens the trunk, shaking his head.

The temperature cools throughout the day, which is spent aimlessly, for the most part. At one point, Tenko, Kaito, and Angie go off exploring and come back with a small pile of sticks, and Shuichi does spend some time reading one of his books to the group, but as the sun sets and evening falls, the group huddles closer together, sitting themselves down in a small circle just by where the van broke down.

Overhead, the stars shine bright. There are no street lamps out here, only winding, endless dusty roads, and the sky is painted in splotches of pink, purple, and blue. Rantaro feels like it's been ages since he's seen the stars out in the open like this, even though this isn't even the best that they can be. There's just

something different about seeing it all with friends, experiencing the world not as a lonely traveler, but as a boy who is loved.

Kaito, sitting next to Rantaro, points up at the sky, and Rantaro follows his finger until he spots the bright red dot he's looking at. "Y'know what planet that is?"

Well, not at first glance, but there's only one red planet close enough for Rantaro to see with the naked eye. "Mars?"

"Bingo," Kaito grins. "The Red Planet. I wanna be one of the first men up there."

"Yeah?" Rantaro glances in Kaito's direction, smiling slightly as the other man begins to ramble.

He's always been a dreamer. It can be difficult, sometimes, to tell the difference between what's all talk and what's the truth, when it comes to Kaito. But he's so *passionate* about the stars, more so than Rantaro has seen him with anything else. There's this quality about him, when he talks about space. His eyes ignite and his smile stretches broad across his face, and weak lungs or not, Rantaro knows whenever he sees Kaito like that that there is truly nothing the universe could do to keep him from the stars.

It's his destiny, and in a way it's almost sad, to have anything be your destiny. But there's something hopeful, too.

Rantaro shivers as he listens to Kaito talk, and Kaito stops mid-sentence, his eyes widening. "Oh, are you cold? Shit, man, you should've said something."

"Not really, I just have a lower cold tolerance, I should be fine," Rantaro starts, but Kaito's already shrugging off his coat, draping it over Rantaro's shoulders.

"You don't gotta pretend for me, man," Kaito grins, and claps Rantaro's back. His hand is warm, even through the fabric of his jacket. "It's okay. We're bros, remember?"

Rantaro bites back a smile at the sincerity in Kaito's voice. "Right."

Pleased, Kaito nods, and opens his mouth to speak again before he's interrupted.

"Kaito, what star is that?" Kaede asks, from across the circle. Kaito perks up, but looks at Rantaro first, like he's hesitant to step away.

"Go, go," Rantaro waves him off, "Kaede needs the Luminary of the Stars more than I do right now."

Kaito laughs, but stands, heading over to where Kaede, Tenko, and Miu are curled up together to stay warm.

Eventually, Shuichi takes Kaito's place, pressing a little closer to Rantaro. Obligingly, Rantaro lifts the edge of Kaito's jacket, and wraps it around the both of them, pulling Shuichi in snug. Shuichi smiles slightly, cozying up to Rantaro.

"Thanks," he says, quietly.

"Us cold people need to stick together," Rantaro states. He takes one of Shuichi's hands in his and squeezes, and Shuichi giggles, resting his head against Rantaro's shoulder. Rantaro gives him a gentle smile before he lifts his head, just in time to catch sight of Angie as she flops down into Rantaro's lap. She doesn't speak, but rather closes her eyes, getting comfortable on Rantaro's thighs.

Obligingly, Rantaro strokes Angie's hair, and she lets out a pleased hum, leaning into the touch, her eyelids fluttering. She must be tired. It makes Rantaro happy, that she can come over to him when she wants to feel safe, tucked up and cozy against his legs.

On Rantaro's other side, Kiibo turns their head, electric blue eyes glowing thoughtfully in the darkness. "Rantaro, would you consider telling us a story?" they ask, tilting their head to the side.

"A story, huh?" Rantaro hums, lifting his hand from Shuichi's to touch his chin. "I wouldn't mind, no. What kind of thing did you have in mind?"

"Tell us one about your sisters!" Kaede pipes up, from where she's got Miu's head in her lap, an excited smile on her face. "You always look so soft when you talk about them! It'd be nice to hear more."

"Only if Amami-san is comfortable with it, though," Tenko adds, shifting her weight against Kaito's shoulder. "Tenko wants to know more about Amami-san's lovely sisters, but not if it's uncomfortable. Rehashing the past has to be painful, and though it's good to open up, it's okay not to be ready. Tenko and everyone else will still be here until you are."

Rantaro knows that, actually. He knows it with his entire soul. It took him until his third year of high school to open up to Shuichi, and then more years after that to finally tell the rest of them. It felt selfish, back then, to indulge in the comfort of others, and a part of him was scared, too, that they would hate him for his mistakes, not want to be around him anymore. A part of him still feels that way, like the clock is just ticking down until they all realize what a mess he is and leave. He wouldn't be able to hold it against them after everything he's done and failed to do.

But Shuichi stayed, when he learned. Kaede, Kaito, Tenko, Miu, Kiibo, and Angie, they stayed. The rest of their class, though they aren't here, when Rantaro finally worked up the courage to confide in them, they stayed too. They stayed right by Rantaro's side, where they've been, without fail, since before they even graduated high school.

It's... a kind of graciousness, a kind of patience, that some days

Rantaro still doesn't feel like he deserves. In the quiet moments, it's all too easy to see the blood that coats his hands, to see the anger in Kasumi's eyes when he finally found her, or the way Hikaru broke down when he came to get her from the airport. He can never fix what he did. Things will never be the same as he remembers them being, back before all his sisters got lost. Even if everyone is alive and wants to come home, even if he manages to fill the house once again, it will be... different. Some days Rantaro doesn't know if he's strong enough to cope with that.

Right now, though, in this moment, with Angie's head in his lap and Shuichi's on his shoulder, with the highway empty and their van broken down, with the stars shining bright overhead (but not as bright as they could be), Rantaro thinks that maybe a little bit of difference is good. It's *not* good to suffer. Nobody deserves to be in pain. But maybe sometimes you have to break in order to shine. Rantaro wouldn't be where he is now without all of those mistakes, no matter how they keep him up at night.

He misses his sisters so badly that it hurts, and that goes for the ones he's found, too, the ones who are different from the girls he left behind, who lived entire *lifetimes* while they were waiting for him to find them. But as much as Rantaro has lost, he's *gained,* too, and he doesn't know where he'd be without this group. They make him feel stronger, better, like he's good enough to bring his sisters home. They make him feel like he deserves to.

"I'm ready for it," Rantaro whispers. He shifts his position, straightening up, but not enough to jostle Angie or Shuichi. He smiles, swallowing thickly so that he doesn't start crying in front of everyone. "How about the story of how my sister Mina lost her first tooth?"

"Is she the one we're looking for?" Kiibo asks.

Rantaro nods. "The very same."

When Miu speaks, her voice is muffled slightly by the fabric of

Kaede's pants, her eyes narrowed. "How much of a story can you get outta that, anyways? Her tooth fell out. The end."

"Don't be mean, Miu!" Kaede huffs.

"It's alright, really," Rantaro chuckles, before Miu can start whimpering. "It was an unconventional tooth-losing. Mina really wanted her tooth fairy money, and Aki really wanted to close a door with a tooth tied to it."

There is a moment of silence.

"Ah," Shuichi intones. Kaito shudders, like he's imagining the pain.

"You can't just say that and then stop talking! Continue the story, Ran-tiddies!" Miu huffs.

"Weren't you just complaining about it?" Kiibo asks skeptically. Miu sticks her tongue out at them, and Rantaro laughs, shaking his head before he does as instructed and resumes the story.

They're all so loud, and chaotic, and messy, and when they finally reach their destination, it'll be a pain in the ass to keep track of all. But it will be worth it, and there's no way Rantaro is going to allow himself to take his eyes off of a single one of them. No way in hell.

It's been a very long time since Rantaro has had something this precious. He's not losing it again.

By Luda

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